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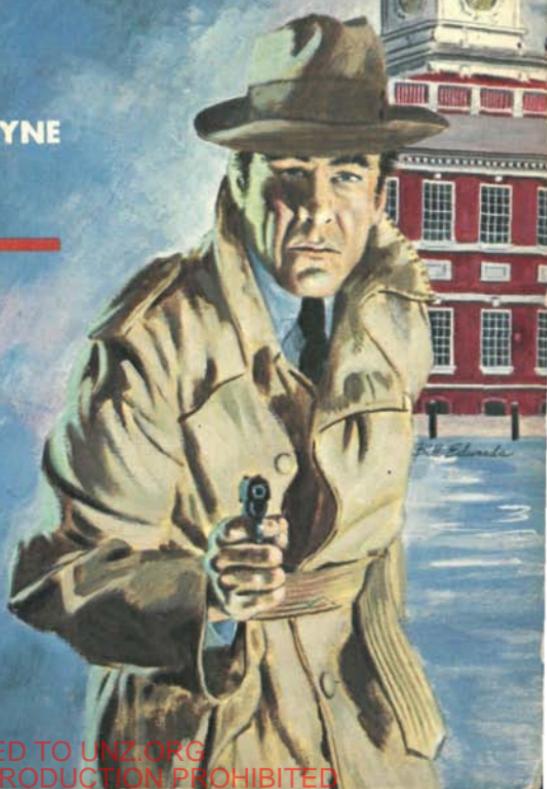
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



MAY, 1975
VOL. 36, NO. 5

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

NEW MIKE SHAYNE ADVENTURE **THE CITY OF BROTHERLY DEATH** by BRETT HALLIDAY

Beneath the surface amiability of the Mark Bruce show, TV's most successful daytime program, lurks a seething cauldron of complex hatreds about to erupt in a murderous flood only Shayne can stem.

2 to 55

NEW JUD BANNING THRILLER **MURDER ON ICE** by PETER GERMANO

Only the ladies like Larry Rudy, to their sorrow, and when the big saloon owner is murdered in his own joint the suspects are legion, including Jud Banning, who must solve it to save his own neck.

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THE CITY OF BROTHERLY DEATH

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL



THE ASSASSIN moved swiftly and silently, with an assurance that could come only from thorough familiarity with the locale selected for the crime.

Carrying a leather and canvas kit bag in one hand, a hotel passkey in the other, it took a mere seven seconds for the killer to emerge from the hotel service elevator, reach the room selected, unlock the door and enter.

Another twenty-three seconds were required to open the bag and to lock together the com-

ponents of the high-velocity rifle it contained. Five more were needed to place the explosive mercury bullet in the chamber and to take position at the window.

There was no attempt to open the window. The rifle was not equipped with a silencer, so the assassin intended to fire through the pane, thus cutting the sound of the shot.

Speed was of the essence. If Mike Shayne were to be eliminated before he could do any real damage, the time was now,

© 1975 by Brett Halliday

It was a quiet crime, until a rifle shot broke the silence. Three million dollars and an international reputation were at stake, and Mike Shayne found himself in a strange city—not only the hunter, but the hunted!



before a real investigation could begin. Thereafter, opportunity would have to wait, and time was running out.

One second, two seconds, then six...seven. The killer stood by the window's edge in the semi-darkness of the unlighted room, waiting.

"Come on, Shayne..." The whisper was barely audible but its urgency was unmistakable.

As if the request had been heard and obeyed, there was sudden half-light in the room directly across the rectangular hotel courtyard. The door had been opened and the glow from the corridor revealed a silhouetted figure entering the room. The waiting killer centered the telescopic sight's cross-hairs on the lanky figure.

If face and features were indistinguishable, the silhouette was identification enough for the killer's purpose. The rifle spat once and a clean round hole appeared in the glass through which it was fired.

In the room across the way, the tall, rangy figure fell forward. The victim had been in the act of kicking the door shut behind him when he was hit. He was carrying a package of some sort that parabolaed from his arms even as the closing door cut off the light.

The killer heaved a sigh of relief and thought, *mission*

accomplished. It was better this way, playing the scene as planned, getting it over with right at the start.

Moving swiftly, the killer disassembled the rifle and repacked it in the leather bag. Thirty-two seconds after the shot was fired, the room door was closed, the killer moving with relaxed strides to the service elevator. A smile appeared on the thin, sensual lips as the lift door closed.

"Goodbye, Michael Shayne," the assassin said softly...

I

LUCY HAMILTON's voice sounded pleased as it came over the intercom on Mike Shayne's desk. "Michael," she said, "an old friend of yours is on the line. Oliver Henson."

"Oliver!" Shayne repeated, startled. It had been ten years since he had seen Oliver Henson. As he reached for the phone, it occurred to Shayne that he hadn't heard directly from the Stocky T.V. executive since the days when Henson, Rourke and Shayne had played cards together.

Henson had moved to Philadelphia, and though Rourke occasionally got word from him, the television executive had not written to Shayne except for an annual Christmas

card. It had been a pleasant, but not especially close, friendship.

"Hello, Ollie!" Shayne said, "Where are you? In Miami?"

"Hi Mike," Henson replied, "Good to here your voice. No, I'm in Philadelphia." He paused then, and an awkward silence ensued.

"Figuring you haven't called me in nearly ten years, you must be in a spot. What can I do for you?" Shayne asked directly.

"You're right," Henson responded, relief in his voice. "There is trouble. Lots of it. Some of it doesn't affect me directly. Not yet. But Mike, I'm afraid it's going to, and quite frankly it scares me. I may be wrong. I hope to God I am. But if I'm not... Well, I'll need a lot of help. I'd like to hire you for the job."

Shayne cradled the phone between his shoulder and chin and lit a cigarette. "Tell me about it, Oliver."

"It's like this, Mike," Henson said, tension in his voice again. "Since moving to Philadelphia, I've come up quite a bit. I'm now about the number four man in line, a vice president, with the Mar-Bru corporation, which heads the Mark Bruce show."

Shayne cocked an eyebrow. The Mark Bruce show was the hit of the season, an immensely

popular and highly rated talk show.

"The spot I'm in," Henson continued, "is like this. I've been running a confidential audit. I think someone in the Corporation, someone high up, is involved in a skimming operation. I don't know who it is, but so far as I can tell now, the finger is pointing—at me. So far, my investigation has been secret. But on top of that Mike," Henson said, then hesitated.

"Yeah, go on," the detective prodded.

"Well, it's crazy, but I also believe someone is trying to kill off the top level management of Mar-Bru." When Shayne remained silent, Henson went on. "I mean, there have been some studio accidents lately. A weight fell, nearly hitting Mark Bruce. That was put down as an accident. Then Monte Cross, the business manager for Mar-Bru, was nearly struck by a hit-and-run driver. No license tags. Then Richard Bruce, who runs Hi-Son for his brother, one of the Mar-Bru companies, was nearly electrocuted on a faulty control board.

"Mike, any one of those, or all of them, could have been accidents. But not all happening within two weeks. So far, the corporation doesn't want the

police involved. So we're stonewalling it. No police, no press. But Mike, I'm worried. Scared is the word. I'd like you to come here and do some high class snooping and just plain watching me. Privately, of course."

Shayne didn't hesitate. "I'll do what I can Oliver. But my presence may put a damper on your would-be murderer's activity, drive him into hiding."

Henson chuckled, relieved. "He won't know why you're here. No one but myself will. I have it planned already. I can arrange for you to be invited as a guest for a week. Bruce builds his shows around themes, and we just happen to have a "crime" theme show coming up. A week long series. And that's when I thought of you. You're a pretty well known detective. Nobody'll think anything of it if you're around.

"And as an old friend of mine, nobody'll think anything of it if you use your free ticket to come early and leave late. A day early and however long later it takes you to get to the bottom of this. Can you come tomorrow?"

"Sure," the redhead said, without hesitation.

Henson's voice relaxed again. "You'll have your invitation tomorrow morning. By phone. Come up in the afternoon. The

show's to be started the day after, if everyone gets here in time. It's a two day show. You're set for both days. As my friend, you'll get the V.I.P. treatment from Mar-Bru, and they'll make all your arrangements for you from here. Mike, it's a relief to know you'll come. And Mike..."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. I know I haven't given you a damned thing to go on, and I appreciate your not asking any questions now. You're a great guy, Mike."

"No problem, Oliver. I'll see you in Philadelphia." Shayne hung up the phone, and leaned back in his chair. The later afternoon Miami sunlight was streaming through his window.

Fortunately, Henson's call had come at a good time. Things had been slow for the detective for over a week.

He just hoped he could do Henson some good. The stakes were obviously high, if someone was willing to attempt murder. The questions multiplied in Shayne's mind.

Skimming could involve a great deal of money—money enough to provide a motive for murder, if the schemer feared discovery. But Henson had said his investigation was a well-kept secret. That meant one of three things. Henson was keeping something back, or the

secret wasn't so well kept as Henson thought—or a top member of the corporation, someone who worked closely with Henson, was in on the scheme.

That being the case, the sudden appearance of a private eye from Miami might frighten the murderer even more.

Lucy Hamilton interrupted Shayne's thoughts. Entering his office, the petite brunette looked questionably at her employer. "That was short," she said, "but I take it it wasn't sweet."

"You're right, Angel," Shayne confirmed. "Oliver's in trouble. He outlined the executive's worries.

"So you'll be going to Philadelphia," Lucy said matter-of-factly.

"I'll be leaving tomorrow."

"It's a shame that it has to be something like this to get you and Oliver together again." Lucy frowned, then added, "Be careful, Michael."

"Don't worry, Angel." Shayne grinned. "I'll take my overcoat."

"And your gun," Lucy said.

"And my gun," Michael Shayne repeated.

II

"CALL ME MONTE! Oliver Henson asked me to meet you,"



said the man who greeted Mike Shayne at the airport. "I'm Monte Cross, the business manager for Mar-Bru. Oliver said he'd see you at your hotel after dinner. Incidentally," Cross continued, smiling, "it's been arranged for you to have dinner with the Bruce's tonight. We're to go there now."

"Great," said Shayne. He let the officious manager lead the way to the baggage area and then to the parking lot where a gleaming black Continental waited. He sensed a tenseness in Cross, who seemed overly talkative.

During the drive, the business manager dominated the conversation. In a way, Shayne was glad. It gave him more background on the Mar-Bru

set-up. Cross discussed the immense popularity of the ninety minute Mark Bruce television variety show, broadcast five afternoons each week from the ballroom of the De Montfort Hotel in West Philadelphia.

Cross recited the show's history from its beginnings on a single station in Cincinnati almost twenty years earlier to its present exalted syndication with more than two-hundred stations in the United States, Canada and English-speaking cities all over the world.

Shayne listened, asking only occasional questions pertaining to his upcoming guest appearance on the show.

"This is almost the last really live show left on TV," Cross explained. "Sure, most stations in other countries and time zones get it on tape, but the show is broadcast live all over the Eastern U.S. Apart from the orchestra and the specialty acts—singers, dancers and rock groups mostly—there is no script or rehearsal.

"You meet with Mark in the green room an hour before show time and simply set up the areas of conversation and the order in which you discuss them. That way the show keeps its spontaneity.

"And don't worry about going dry," Cross assured Shayne heartily. "Mark is a remark-

ably talented TV performer. He also has instinctive skills and has acquired a few more along the way. Keeping the show going is definitely one of them."

A pause, then Cross went on, "He's a happy-go-lucky bastard. You'll like Mark—you can't help liking him. He made it big despite the fact he was a mediocre vocalist with a mediocre big band. He can't act his way into a paper bag, much less out of one. The most disarming thing about Mark is that he doesn't give a damn. He goes right on playing himself and lets the chips fall where they may—which are mostly blue chips in his bank account. He hasn't a worry in the world and that's a big element in his success."

There had been more talk, lots more, between the airport and the Bruce estate. But not a mention of attempted murder nor of Oliver Henson. Once upon arrival at his chief's immense pseudo-Tudor mansion at the end of a long winding driveway, Cross clammed up. The private detective wondered why.

"I'm sorry your friend, Ollie Hanson, isn't here," said Mark Bruce as he greeted Shayne. "He had some last minute problem. Said he'd call you later."

"That's alright," replied the detective, appraising the man

in front of him. The smile on the star's face indicated a nervousness inappropriate to the man's public reputation.

"It's odd Ollie would invite you to the show," said the woman introduced as Bruce's wife, Brenda. "I mean we have a policeman.

"Police work and detective work are often different and at odds," Shayne grinned.

"I guess so," Mrs. Bruce said with a frown.

Shayne was quickly introduced then to the others, and, as it was already time for dinner, the party adjourned to the dining room—a large formal room overlooking the magnificent sweep of the broad lawns of the estate; at the end of which sat a small two story brick cottage, a small but exact replica of the mansion.

It was during a pause in the small talk that Shayne noted another indication that all was not well with the Bruce empire.

Gloria Bruce laid down her fork and said, "Why is it that every time I come here I feel like somebody's walking over my grave?"

Her small, deep-set, heavily lined, brown eyes smoldered unhappily within the frame of her redwood-red hair. A slight shudder shook the lavender clad curves of her visible torso.

Her husband, Richard Bruce,

sighed and said, "Really, Gloria!"

"It's okay, Rich." Brenda Bruce smiled vaguely at her sullen brother-in-law across the table. "I get the same feeling now and then in this room."

"It's positively spooky," said Gloria firmly. "I keep feeling I'm being watched."

From the head of the long refectory table, Mark Bruce said, "We all have. Perhaps Mike Shayne can explain it." He looked at the detective.

Shayne decided to field the request lightly. He said, "As a detective, I'd say it was nothing more than a minor muscle spasm." He grinned. "But that's a guess. Something the police aren't allowed to use as evidence."

Monte Cross, seated diagonally across from Shayne, who was on his host's right, said, "Maybe that's why detectives are called in more often than police—when there's a crime and no clues."

"Could be," replied Shayne, still smiling. "We can often dig up things the police overlook, and use evidence they can't use."

"No wonder Ollie wanted you—and a policeman," Brenda Bruce said.

Cross returned to his eating. It was almost the first word the business manager of Mark

Bruce's far flung enterprises had spoken since they started dinner. The others at the table remained silent.

Obviously, something was making the entire group jumpy.

For one of the entertainment industry's most publicized big, happy family groups, the inner core of the Mark Bruce empire was racked with unexpressed tensions.

Even before Gloria Bruce had expressed her feeling, Shayne had caught occasional twin glints of light at an upstairs window, in the distant cottage, glints that could well be caused by the early evening light reflected from a pair of field glasses. Gloria's discomfort was not self induced but was a result of a near-universal sixth sense. Shayne himself had more than once experienced.

If Brenda Bruce's corroboratory remark was true, then somebody was making a habit of spying on the family while they sat at table. A murderer staking out the place? As the entrée was removed and the dessert served Shayne said, "A fine view you have here, Mr. Bruce! Is that little house down there part of the estate?"

"Call me Mark, Mike, everybody else does." Bruce looked out the french windows in the direction Shayne had indicated. "The answer to your question is

yes—and no. When we bought this place, the former owner insisted on life tenure in the gardener's cottage as a condition of the sale."

"So someone's living there now," said Shayne.

Brenda Bruce made a face, said, "We've tried to be friendly, the good lord knows, but Mr. Snowden simply isn't having any. I'm afraid he detests us."

"Well, you can't really blame him," said Mark Bruce. "After all, if you'd been brought up on a place like this that had been in your family for four generations..." He let it hang.

Richard Bruce, dark and sullen of expression, said, "If there's anything I hate, it's a sore loser."

"Unless it's a sore winner." Having uttered this cliché, their host sat back and awaited amused response. When only Shayne smiled, Bruce shrugged and started his dessert.

Somewhere in the house, a distant telephone rang three times. Moments later, a maid brought in a portable phone, placed it at Monte Cross's elbow and squatted awkwardly to plug it into a wall jack. From this position, she said, "For you, Mr. Cross."

The business manager had already put the instrument to his right ear. He said, "Cross

here," listened for a long moment, then said, "If everything's all set, why do you need me?" Another pause to listen, then, "Oh, I see. Okay, okay, I'll get right in."

Cross put the phone back in its cradle, looked at Mark Bruce, said, "You heard. There's some foul-up in town. An—accident. I've got to take off." Then, to Shayne, "Sorry, but Rich will have to drive you to the hotel. Okay?" Without waiting for an answer, Monte Cross hustled out.

Gloria broke the vacuum. Cross left behind him, saying, "I think he arranges these calls to come just after he eats. He always was a freeloader."

"*Gloria!*" chided Brenda Bruce. Mark Bruce's wife had obviously been a beauty in an ultra-flashy, show-business-blonde way. Although her face now boasted an extra chin and her body threatened at any instant to burst through the costly clothing that encompassed it, she was still a remarkably pretty woman in Shayne's opinion.

Gloria, tauter strung, more used looking, said, "Oh, it's true enough, and you all know it. Monte's got the first dollar he ever made—and you can bet he made it by conning it out of somebody else."

"Take it easy, hon," said

Richard Bruce, laying his napkin on the tablecloth. "If Monte weren't so sharp, we'd none of us be where we are today."

"Which is *where* exactly?" countered Gloria. She glanced at a diamond studded platinum wristwatch, then pushed her chair back from the table. "It's kickoff time. I want to see how Roman Gabriel handles the Forty-Niners. He was terrific last Sunday against the Bears."

As Gloria swung out of the room, Mark asked his wife why she refused to have a television set in the dining room.

"How often do I have to tell you," Brenda said, "it's uncivilized to have one on while you eat. Amy Vanderbilt says..."

It was evidently a well-worn conversational track, one to which Mike Shayne only half-listened. He had a number of other things to consider just then, chief among them the nature of the case that had brought him from Miami to Philadelphia.

No one had mentioned Oliver Henson again, but the man and his problem were much on the detective's mind. And the "accident" Cross had mentioned. Shayne itched to be on the scene. He assumed it wasn't fatal, or Cross would have been more upset than he seemed.

The family's reaction, one of

dead silence, then total avoidance told the detective much. They were extremely worried. And they didn't know Shayne's true purpose there. They obviously were not going to confide in him. He was an outsider to them.

There was a sudden noise as a small horde of children, offspring of both families, emerged from another room in which they had been fed ("Throwing chunks of raw meat into the animal cage," Mark Bruce had termed it) under the harried aegis of a nondescript sort of governess named Go-Go. Go-Go then bundled up the half dozen youngsters and took them off to a movie in a chauffeur driven estate wagon.

During the uproar, the Bruce brothers got into a quiet argument in a far corner of the living room. As the hubbub of the children's departure abruptly ceased with the loud slam of an unseen front door, Shayne heard Mark say, "God dammit, Rich, how many times have I told you—no shop talk on Sunday! If Monte Cross can keep his mouth shut, so can you."

"But, Mark, this is urgent!" There was no mistaking the desperation in the younger brother's voice. "If you don't do—"

Whatever it was Richard Bruce wanted his brother to do

was cut off knife-clean by the sudden amplification of the huge console television set against the west wall of the big living room.

Gloria, who had turned up the volume, cried exultantly to the room at large, "Oh, *wow!* A seventy-two yard touchdown pass! Gabe, *I love you!*"

By the time Mike Shayne returned his attention to the Bruce brothers, they were leaving the room. Mark had his arm around his sibling's shoulder and was evidently talking to relieve his anxiety. But of what they were saying as they departed, Shayne was unable to pick up a syllable.

At least, the redhead thought wryly, he had learned the reason for Monte Cross's abrupt silence on arriving at his employer's home. The business manager had talked nothing but shop all the way from the airport. Evidently he had nothing else to talk about, in view of Mark's just overhead ukase.

Brenda joined her sister-in-law in front of the TV and became engrossed in the football game. Shayne found himself left to his own devices. Outside, through the pair of french windows, the sun-drenched lawn beckoned. He decided to take a walk. It was the first opportunity the rangy detective had had

to stretch his legs since leaving Miami.

The gardener's cottage looked like a promising goal.

The grass was soft underfoot, the air clean and refreshing, as Shayne made his way down the gentle slope toward the barrier of evergreens near the cottage. The mild exercise and the freshness of the air, served to lighten the cannon-ball load of the dinner he had just eaten, however sparingly, and helped relieve the tension he felt at his inactivity.

Shayne was within fifty feet of the gardener's cottage when there was a sudden stirring in the tree barrier and a tall, slightly stooped old man appeared. He was reed-thin beneath the well worn casual tweeds and flannels that covered him. His well worn saddle shoes were highly polished, his eyes a bright and piercing blue.

He planted himself in front of the detective, looking at him angrily from his six-feet-three, said, "Mr. Michael Shayne?" And, when the redhead acknowledged his identity, he continued, "I am Converse Snowden."

"Oh, yes," said the Miami detective. "You used to own this place."

In accents as readily aristocratic as his attire, the displaced



MARK BRUCE

ex-millionaire said without further preamble, "I see you've met the riffraff."

Snowden sensed the detective's withdrawal, said, "Sorry I intruded on your walk, Mr. Shayne. But mark my words, there's trouble brewing in that house. I don't know its nature yet—I leave that up to you. After all, you're the detective, not I."

"You didn't intrude," said Shayne. "And I'll take note of your warning. But let me give you one. Men who use field glasses to spy on their neighbors usually get in trouble themselves. Be seeing you, Mr. Snowden."

Shayne left the old man staring after him with his mouth half open. Shayne was not accustomed to being so easily recognized. The former owner's knowing his identity must have been because a local television columnist had a story of the guests on the upcoming Bruce Show. What did trouble Shayne was the fact that, in view of Oliver Henson's phone call and what he himself had observed and felt while in the big house, Converse Snowden was right in his surmise of trouble.

When Shayne got back to the house, the football game was over and Richard and Gloria Bruce were awaiting his return. Their Jaguar sedan was pulled up to the front of the house, and they were obviously ready to drive the lanky detective back to his hotel.

"Sorry about deserting you like that, Shayne," Rich Bruce said. "Sometimes the press of business..." He let the apology hang.

"That's okay," the redhead said. "Actually, I enjoyed the chance to stretch my legs."

"It is a nice walk," Gloria confirmed. "Did you get to go far?"

"Not too far," Shayne replied. "Just down by those trees over there, then back."

"You should have used the garden in back," Gloria said in a strange tone of voice. "It's really very pretty this time of year," she added more lightly, climbing into the car.

Her conversation remained on a trivial level during the drive into town, while Richard Bruce concentrated on driving. Shayne allowed his mind to drift to Henson's problem and the upcoming meeting with the television executive, listening to Gloria's pleasantries with only half an ear. As stonewallers, they were experts, Shayne told himself.

At the De Montfort Hotel, the detective checked in. His reservations, as promised, had already been made by the Mar-Bru Corporation, and he only needed to sign in. This done, he was escorted to the elevators and up to his room by a bell hop, who, since Shayne's luggage had been sent directly to the hotel from the airport, did not enter the room, and was pleasantly surprised at the five dollar tip Shayne handed him.

When the bellhop departed, Shayne stepped into his room.

His luggage was on a rack at the foot of the bed. On the floor lay a corpse.

III

THE BODY was that of a male clad in the dark blue and silver uniform of a hotel attendant. It lay face down in the bedroom.

The head was a ball of bone fragments, blood and brains from which a still-red, still-spreading pool was darkening the dove carpet.

Just beyond the shattered head, a silver ice bucket lay on its side, spewing ice cubes and water around a magnum of Mumm's Cordon Rouge. The twin bureau lamps Shayne had turned on, shed a soft and flattering orange glow on the grisly scene.

It took little expert knowledge to determine what had happened. During the delays on Shayne's signing in at the desk, the manager must have sent a room-service waiter on up ahead to put the champagne bucket in the redhead's room.

He realized that the attack must have been recent. Shayne's first move was to drop to his hands and knees. The detective crawled to the large window. It overlooked the central courtyard extending upward from the third story, around which the twelve resi-

dential floors of the De Monte-fort were built.

Neither drapes nor venetian blinds were drawn and a clean small hole in the glass, a hole Shayne estimated to be of approximately thirty millimeters in diameter, indicated where the bullet had made its fatal entry.

Moving cautiously so as not to expose himself to a possibly still waiting sniper, he managed to draw both blinds and drapes to afford himself at least visual protection against the assassin. Shayne was still adjusting the blind cord when the room telephone sounded. Walking carefully around the room edges so as not to cast his shadow on the drapes, Shayne moved to answer it.

"Mike?" It was Oliver Henson's voice. "Are you alone?"

"Yes—and no," replied Shayne.

"What does that mean?" Henson was surprised at the detective's crypticism.

"It means," Shayne spelled out "that someone was here ahead of me—someone very recently dead."

"Dead!" Henson was obviously shocked. "What happened?" Then, "Are you all right?"

"In answer to your second question, I'm all right so far.

The answer to your first is a guess—it seems a hotel waiter arrived, just ahead of me, with a champagne bucket. Somebody shot him through the window from across the courtyard."

"Jesus Christ! I'll be right over. Have you called the police?"

"I've had no time to call anybody," said Shayne. "I just got here."

"Then *don't!* And don't let anyone in until I get there—which will take about ten minutes. Just sit tight. I'll explain. I've got to get you out of there."

Shayne hung up and sat at the head of the bed and waited. Some thirteen minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

"Oliver?" Shayne called.

"It's me," said the man's familiar deep voice.

Only then did Shayne open the door and stand aside while Henson entered, followed by a pair of men of the modern lean law-school-graduate type. One of them closed the door behind the group.

"Two of Mar-Bru's lawyers, Carruthers and Brooks," said Henson, introducing the men.

One of the lawyers knelt alongside the corpse, careful to keep his clothing free from the pool of blood. He quickly and expertly went through the man's pockets, producing an

unremarkable little pile of personal possessions which he placed on the bureau when he rose.

"Nothing here but a couple of hot credit cards," Carruthers said.

"That goes on everywhere," Henson said. Then, to Shayne, "Let's see the hole in the window. Brooks, switch off the lights—all except the one in the closet."

It was done. Standing at one side of the window to afford a minimum of exposure, Henson drew back the drapes and opened the venetian blinds. He studied the hole, then redrew the drapes, saying, "Mike, where do you think it came from?"

"From a room across the court," said Shayne. "Since the bullet did not shatter the window, I would say it struck head on."

"Right," said Henson. He turned to the man called Brooks. "You and Carruthers get on it. I want this covered. Minimum involvement for Shayne, and try to low-profile the show. I'm taking Mike Shayne to Bookbinder's, where we can talk, if you have to reach me."

He turned to Shayne. "I think it's best somebody else finds the body. I don't want you to be involved too much with

the police. It might make your work for me harder, and could cause cancellation of the show we've planned." He grinned a little as he added, "Of course, the fact that it happened in your room can be plugged. Very appropriate for an upcoming crime show."

Henson turned to Brooks. "Notify the police after we've been gone a half hour or so. You don't happen to know anyone locally on the police force, do you, Mike?"

"I worked once with Dennis O'Laughlin, on the homicide detail. He may still be around. I don't know."

"Excellent," said Henson. He turned back to Brooks. "O'Laughlin is the one to call. Ask him to delay questioning Shayne, if possible. I'm sure he'll cooperate. Since Shayne isn't supposed to know anything at all, and with his reputation, there's no reason for O'Laughlin to buck. Tell him we want to avoid publicity, if possible. Keep plugging that excuse. It's one a cop would understand."

He returned his attention to Shayne. "Come on, Mike."

Shayne went along, marvelling at the cavalier manner in which Henson simply ignored normal legal requirements in a matter of murder. He knew the Mar-Bru official undoubtedly

had his reasons, but the redhead felt disapproval all the same. Still, it was Henson's show for the time being.

In the limousine that took them to Bookbinder's, the famous restaurant, Shayne could not resist expressing his feelings. "Oliver, aren't you being rather high-handed as far as the police are concerned? Why all the secrecy? This run-around?"

"You'll understand after I brief you," said Henson nervously, "though I'm not certain even I understand everything that's happened. I'm scared, and this murder has me even more scared, if anything. Just let me think, Mike, let me get my thoughts together."

Henson was silent for the rest of the ride into town, nor did he speak again until Mike Shayne's cognac and his own vodka martini had been served.

"Let me give you a little background here, first, Mike," Henson said, "and then when I'm through you can ask any questions you want, or think necessary."

"Sure, go ahead," the redhead agreed.

Henson took a sip of his martini. "Okay. Let's see. I guess you know pretty much about the public image of the Mar-Bru shows. But like an iceberg, what the public sees and knows

is only about a sixth of what there is.

"In organization, which Monte Cross manages, Mar-Bru has more tax write off companies than an octopus has tentacles. Actually, the Corporation is a... a cluster of corporations, closely interlocked, that includes two local radio stations and a recording company, Hi-Son, Incorporated. And therein lies the potential stink in the Mar-Bru Denmark."

"Why two stations?" Shayne asked. "Self competition is stupid."

"Not in this case," said Henson. "Cross is too sharp to get caught in that nutcracker. Both stations follow the regular pattern—you know, D.J.'s spinning platters between commercials, news and special events. But while WPEN is slanted for the square audience, WFIL aims for the hipsters—and gets them."

"I see," Shayne nodded as he sipped his drink. "and the record company makes and sells platters plugged on the air."

"It's more complicated than that. They avoid the conflict of interest laws by a number of legal devices. The whole family is involved," said the official, "But that's the general idea."

"Where do the attempted murders fit in this picture, Oliver?"

"I'm working up to that. Let me go on. My department has been quietly conducting an audit of the entire Mar-Bru conglomeration," said the executive. "I'm the Vice President, in charge of accounting. I find that millions are being skimmed off the top of the enterprise, profits, and I don't know where it's going. But I do know one thing." Henson paused.

"Yes. . .?"

"Well, a couple of weeks ago I began to see a pattern emerging. Several expense vouchers were approved with my initials. Vouchers I couldn't recall seeing before, for men I never recalled meeting. This started me off on the right track. I talked with the V.P. in charge of sales and promotion, Garson Bender. The vouchers came from the promotion staff. Yet not one of the men whose names were on the vouchers were on the payroll.

"Now Mike, at this point, I was being very discreet. No one besides myself and my assistant even knew the audit had been started. When I talked with Bender, I just asked if he'd ever hired or heard of any of the two men in whose names the vouchers had been submitted, and he said no.

"These weren't very big vouchers, but then I began looking

through all the vouchers. Mike, millions have left the company in one way or another over my initials. Occasionally to mythical men, maybe six altogether from what I've found so far, but also a great many to legitimate company officials. A trip to Bermuda, for example, in Richard Bruce's name, approved by myself, as such a trip would have to be, but a trip Richard Bruce never took.

"I followed through by checking bookkeeping practices. Now in a complex organization like Mar-Bru, the bookkeeping is done in the simplest possible manner: all double entry in every company.

"I knew from the year-end reports that the books all balanced. But Mike, none of the books showed the money—and so far, the total is over three million dollars—either being earned by the company *or* spent!

"The only answer to that is a set of books being kept by an executive of the company, someone who takes in money and does not hand it over to the proper departments, but is shifting it. The vouchers he uses are coming to light, but not the corresponding checks."

"Who do you think the chief culprits are," Shayne asked.

Henson sighed, "Oh, I have ideas—too many of them.



Monte Cross, for one. He's the cement that holds the actual business pieces together.

"There's brother Richard, the nominal head of Hi-Son, the recording company. He's in it, of that I'm certain. But he's the classic kid brother, spoonfed by Mark from the age of twelve, when their parents were killed. He has some ability but how much it's hard to judge with Monte Cross calling the shots. Then there are a number of other Mar-Bru executives you have yet to meet." The executive paused.

Shayne frowned. "What are you holding back?"

Henson hesitated, then, following a sigh, "You're right, of course. For a proper case, I need records."

Shayne was amazed. "But

there must be records for such an operation."

"Oh, there are. Everything neatly tied up and packaged by blue-ribbon auditors—even our own experts. It all adds up and balances to a T."

"Then where's your case, Oliver?"

"Just my own knowledge and instinct—And the accidents. And now this killing. There's a hole in there somewhere, Mike, a hole through which three million have been siphoned off. It's like a black nebula. I know it's there but I can only prove its existence by its effect on the elements that surround it. And that's not good enough. Don't look at me like that, Mike. I'm only one man."

"Hell, the government still has experts trying to unravel Sam Insull's holding company conglomerate. That fell apart in the early Thirties and nobody has been able to clear it up. Why not? Simply because Insull was a mathematical genius who kept most of the vital figures in his head. To this day they don't know how it was done."

"Then look for a mathematical genius in Mar-Bru," Shayne said.

"Don't think I haven't," said the TV executive. "Unfortunately, there are too many. Monte Cross likes people with abacus brains. Claims it saves

time and a lot of computer rental."

"Incidentally, for an old showman with no more than a high-school education, he's one hell of a personnel manager. He knows how to get the men and women he wants and how to keep their loyalty. Oh, he's got to be in on it if he isn't the leading spirit."

"I could get him, never fear," added Henson. "And I could find the leak in the corporate coffers, too. But I don't know whether I could do it before the I.R.S. and F.C.C. review our books. And that, Mike, is the real crux. They'll be here next week. I can't hide the proof I need fast enough. I'm hoping you'll be able to help. You're my last hope."

"I'll do my best," promised Shayne.

"Good!" Henson beamed at him. "I knew I could count on you, Mike. Both as an investigator and as a man, I have the utmost confidence in you. You'll deliver."

"But I work my own way," said the detective.

Henson's face crinkled. He said, "I promised you freedom. I meant what I said."

"That's not all that bothers me," Shayne went on. "There's also a little matter of murder back at the hotel. And at least three other attempted cases."

Henson's face went cold. "Okay. Mike, I was being honest when I said I wanted your involvement kept to a minimum for the sake of the show. And I admit I panicked, maybe over-reacted. But Mike, it's the *fifth* attempt at murder. The first successful one." He paused. "You see, Mike, I'm using a company limousine because the brakes on my own car went out. The mechanic says the brake-line was cut. That was when I called Cross in.

"I didn't report that to the cops, either. Because Mike, I think to do so would play into the hands of whoever is behind this. I think he wants some bad publicity. I think he wants it to involve me seriously. So that when the I.R.S. audit is made next week, I'll either be dead or involved in a mess so thickly I won't have time to realise what the I.R.S. and F.C.C. are finding.

"You see," Henson went on, "I didn't think whoever this is knew that I'm on his trail. I thought he was following a pre-arranged plan. But now...there's no telling what his plan is. Obviously, he's on to you. Knows why you're here."

Shayne nodded grimly. "Okay. That would indicate obviously it has to be a top

member of the Mar-Bru Organization."

Henson looked equally grim. "I don't see how anyone *could* know why you're here. I told no one. I...I only hope..."

"You better just hope we have your swindler and killer before he strikes again. Or the police *will* take a dim view of this coverup. Damned dim."

The detective paused, then went on. "So, the logical suspects are the top members of Mar Bru. Someone with access to your records and forms. You haven't said so, but I assume that means Mark Bruce, Richard Bruce, Monte Cross and yourself. You said you were fourth in line, and that looks like the line up to me.

"Eliminating you, that means our killer is pretty damned clever. Besides learning some way about my reasons for a visit here, he's made an attempt on his own life, to divert suspicion. So let's narrow this down even closer if we can. Who has access to all the records necessary to run a skim operation?"

Henson looked at the table. "No one except myself. Cross can get to some of it, maybe even most of it. Mark Bruce can get to a lot of it, but not without going through channels. Same for Richard Bruce.

"I'm the only one with access

to everything necessary, and supposedly, outside my assistant, the only one who knows of my own audit. Everyone in management is aware of the upcoming I.R.S. and F.C.C. investigations."

"And your assistant?"

"He's out, Shayne. He does no more than type my reports. He couldn't withdraw a blank expense voucher without going through a virtual F.B.I. check around here. Like a lot of big companies, the blank forms are as securely guarded as cash. No, you can count him out. Besides, he's been on vacation for the last two weeks. Just when the accidents started. And long before I decided to ask for your help."

"You're sure?" Shayne asked, tugging at his earlobe.

"Yes. Really, Mike. I checked. He's been in Colorado. I even called him there within half an hour of the hit and run attempt on Monte."

"Hired killers?"

"Not on his salary."

"So it's Cross, the Bruces—or you."

Henson nodded glumly. "That's it, Mike."

"And how would anyone else learn the reasons for my visit," Shayne queried next.

"I put nothing in writing. I told no one. But..."

Henson looked sheepish. "I

called you from the office. All the top executives share the same lines—that is, nine are shared. We each have a private line, but I left mine free for a call I expected—and used a 'regular' line."

"So any of the people we've mentioned could have heard what you said to me."

"Any of them. Any of their secretaries. Any of their assistants," Henson nodded glumly. "It was a mistake."

"A fatal one for the guy in my room," Shayne said succinctly.

IV

AN ASHEN-FACED Monte Cross gripped Mike Shayne as the detective walked toward the elevator.

"Thank God, you're safe!" the business manager said in low, fervent tones. "I've been going out of my mind. A man was shot to death in your room, and I haven't been able to find out if—" He let it hang, then added, "Thank God, it wasn't you."

Shayne feigned surprise, said, "Somebody shot? Who?"

"We don't know, but..." Cross shook his sandy, semi-bald head like a dog shaking water out of his hair, added, "Thank God it wasn't you! Come on upstairs. This is

—well, it's like a miracle. Too many. Too many accidents," he murmured.

Shayne permitted the business manager to divert him to a side elevator, which took them quickly to the top floor.

Once upstairs, Cross led the detective into a penthouse suite, luxuriously furnished, and poured himself a large bicarbonate.

Shayne accepted a cognac with a glass of ice water, said, "If a body was found, where are the cops?"

"Prowling around on the other side of the hotel." The business manager wiped his lips with a fine linen handkerchief. "Looking over the room they figure the shots came from."

Cross moved nervously to a terrace door, opened it, said, "I need fresh air. Frankly, I thought at first the victim was you. The cops said no, and I was downstairs, trying to find out who could give me more information, who was in charge, when you walked in. I still don't know who the victim was."

Cross came back inside, a stocky yet somehow graceful figure, well dressed in near-Mod fashion with an elegant pale blue turtleneck that matched his eyes.

He flung himself into an

overstuffed armchair, added, "The police seem to think it was just some crazy sniper, but Mike, do you realize what it would have done to this week's programs if you had been killed?"

"Frankly, I hadn't given it much thought." Shayne said wryly. "My interest is on the man who was murdered. I wonder who could have been in my room?"

The business manager frowned, said, "I suppose a staff member. Probably a bellhop. I am baffled."

He rose, crossed to a telephone on a low table, dialed twice, then said, "Monte Cross here. Who was the last staff member sent to Mike Shayne's room? Is he there now?" Then, after a pause, "I see. Davison. Has his . . . family been notified?" Another pause. "Very good." Cross hung up.

"Davison. . ." he murmured. "One of the most reliable room service waiters the hotel's got. So that's who. . .!"

Recalling the two hot credit cards found in the deceased's wallet, Shayne pondered briefly the reliability of the rest of the De Montfort staff. He said, "Sorry. . ."

Cross looked at Shayne narrow-eyed, said, "Come to think of it, Davison's about your height and build."

"Damned unfortunate, if he was mistaken for me."

"Well," said the business manager after a pause, "Now we've got the problem of keeping you in one piece until tomorrow when we go on the air. God knows what's going on here. You know..." he hesitated, changed his mind. "I'd put you up here in my suite except that I don't suppose the hotel's too safe. If it isn't just some nut, if somebody *did* take a shot at you, the implications are terrifying. It could be they'll try again. And God only knows who the murderer may be. I hope it's just some nut."

Cross shook his head, was about to continue when the telephone rang. "Who in hell?" he muttered as he moved to answer it. "I left orders no calls were to be put through."

Then, after listening, "Yes, he's here—and quite all right, thank you. Is Rich with you, Gloria? Come on up. I want you to drive Shayne back to Rosemont."

Putting the phone down, Cross said, "Rich and Gloria will drive you back to Mark's house. You'll be safe there. The estate is patrolled by security guards with German shepherds. That is, if it's okay with you..."

Shayne hesitated. Neither he nor Henson had counted on this

opportunity. He decided to take it.

He said, "Great, Monte."

When Richard and Gloria Bruce arrived, the redhead noted that the television star's younger brother no longer looked sullen but seemed oddly light-hearted and relieved about something. Certainly, he appeared friendlier than he had previously shown himself to be in the short hours of their acquaintance.

Shayne's two travel-worn bags were retrieved and delivered to Rich Bruce's car. This time, Gloria did the driving, while Shayne sat on the far right side of the wide front seat of the smart sedan.

Gloria drove at a speed which alarmed the detective until he realized that she was driving with the expertise and quick reaction-timing of a professional. When they halted for a red light, he asked her if she had ever been a race driver.

"Only bikes; powder puff derbies, like that." Gloria replied as she shot forward again. "I was riding obstacle courses when Monte picked me up. He was still running a carnay then and carrying the Mar-Bru thing with it. You got to say this for him; he knows where the money is."

Richard Bruce said, "He wanted Gloria in the business

office. She was his secretary until she married me."

Shayne considered this. He wondered what special talent the adventurous Gloria had that had recommended her to a man as astute as Monte Cross, filed the question away for future inquiry.

There was little other conversation in the course of a drive made relatively brief by the cessation of Sunday night traffic and the speed at which Gloria tooled the sedan.

Brenda Bruce greeted them at the door of the Rosemont mansion, already forewarned of their arrival by the business manager.

When they entered, Gloria spirited Richard Bruce away, leaving the detective alone with his hostess. She seemed as amiable as a blond plum pudding, made him at home rapidly with a cup of hot coffee, then said, "You'll have to put up with half-made bedroom, I'm afraid. This is the maid's night off."

"I don't mind," Shayne assured her. "I'm just sorry to impose on you."

"One thing I've learned," said Brenda. "Whenever Monte makes a request, he's always got a good reason. So mine's not to reason why. However, I am glad to see you again."

Mark Bruce appeared in the



RICHARD BRUCE

doorway. "I'd like to talk to Mike, he said. He was wearing unseasonable plaid Bermuda walking shorts and a brown pullover. "We might as well set up the show while he's back." Then, to the detective with courtly politeness, "That is, if you're not too tired, Mike, for a talk now."

There was slight unsteadiness in the star's half-bow that matched a faint but noticeable thickness in his speech. By the time Shayne had excused himself to Brenda and been escorted to his host's study, it was

obvious that Mark Bruce was smashed.

This estimate was backed up by the half-empty, full-quart of Ballantine's Scotch. It stood with a nearly melted bucket of ice and a pair of tumblers on a low table in front of the red-leather sofa that faced the big blond walnut desk. The windowless areas of the walls were lined with morocco-bound gold-tooled sets of the classics in glass-fronted bookshelves, all of which looked unopened.

Atop the shelves were a series of beautifully executed and gaily painted models of World War One airplanes. Bruce noted that the detective was regarding them with admiration, and made a deprecating gesture.

"They're all assembly kits," he explained. "All I do is put 'em together and paint 'em. It was Snoopy, the comic-strip dog that got me started."

"Shayne smiled. "The Red Baron!"

"Zactly," said Bruce. "There's his li'l red triplane on your left."

Mark Bruce offered Shayne a drink which the detective accepted. Hope I'm not keeping you up," said Mark, perching on a corner of the desk after filling both their glasses and taking a hearty pull at his own. "But it gets lonely as hell here

sometimes. Brenda doesn't drink, you know."

This was spoken in a tone that condemned her abstinence as a flaw of personality or character. As if to mitigate his spouse's failing, Bruce added! "Even a glass of beer gives her hives."

"Is there much to do to prepare the show?" Shayne suggested.

"Not really," the star replied. "It's all cut and dried after so many years. Don't worry, Mike, I won't let you fall on your face."

As he said this, he put his free hand down to grip the edge of the desk and missed it, all but falling. He regained his balance, smiled sheepishly, said, "Better watch my own step—but the carpet's soft and it wouldn't be the first time."

The word *first* came out *firsh* as he pronounced it. He sat there, gloomily staring at nothing while the detective wondered if he should break the long uncomfortable silence.

Finally, Mark Bruce broke it. He said, "You know, when the show first began to catch on, I thought I had the world by the tail. Christ, Mike I hadn't amounted to a hill of beans till Monte took hold of me after the band broke up.

"We were bucking the Ruth Lyons breakfast show in Cin-

cinnati and, believe me, that was tough in those days. Had to pull a lot of stunts to get our share of the audience. But we finally made it.

"And the bigger we made it, the less fun it got. I used to enjoy being a celebrity. Then, after we went into big syndication, it got to be a nuisance. Pests and cranks. Why do you think we have all this damned security? We get kidnap threats for the kids about four times a year. Twice somebody tried to blackmail Brenda. Once, they even tried to snatch me!"

This, as if it were the ultimate in improbability. Then...

"Now, not even the show is fun. It's become routine, doing the same things with different people over and over again. Would you believe, lots of the time, I can't tell the guests apart. I can predict all their reac—their reac-shuh—oh, hell! How they'll answer before they open their mouths. They're all on for a buck, one way or another—at least nine out of ten of them are—and the other's some kind of a crank plugging some kooky cockamamie cause. You know how it is, Mike."

"Why don't you quit then?" Shayne asked.

"Because I can't. Because I've got all these cockamamie people depending on me for their

bread and butter. If I quit, they fall apart and it's all my fault." A pause, then a flash of awareness and a charming smile, and "No Mike, that's not entirely true. If I quit, I'd fall apart at the seams. You see, the show's the one and only thing I do well. If I quit, then I'm nobody. Not even all these—accidents will stop me."

It was a final flash. As he finished, his eyes closed and he sat there on the corner of the big blond desk, swaying dangerously.

Shayne managed to catch him before he fell and piloted him, staggering, to the sofa. He retrieved the star's empty tumbler from the carpet and put it back on the tray. Then he left Mark Bruce snoring gently on the leather couch.

Outside in the living room, Brenda was awaiting him with weary anxiety in her expression. She said, "Is he...?"

"He's okay," said the detective. "He's sleeping it off on the sofa."

"I'd better see that he's covered." Brenda rose and shook down her too-tight house coat of bright floral pattern. "But first, let me show you your room. I'm afraid I had to put you on the ground floor. The upstairs is a mess what with the kids and the servants off."

Shayne gathered that Brenda

Bruce was not a notably efficient housekeeper, but the bedroom she led him to, with its own bath off the far end of the living room, was both neat and well appointed. After drawing the drapes halfway closed and showing him the closets, she left saying, "I'm sorry I didn't get you unpacked."

Secretly, the detective was pleased rather than the reverse.

He got out his clothes and hung them in the closet, before turning in for the night. The large double bed faced the windows that overlooked the same sweep of lawn he had observed earlier from the dining and living rooms.

He lay there pondering the events of the day and evening. The lights were out and the curtains half drawn. Shayne looked through the open french windows at the moonswept stretch of lawn now dark grey at night. Frankly tired, he decided morning would be soon enough to work on the problems. There was nothing he could do about the skulduggery going on in the Mar-Bru conglomerate tonight.

The next few days, he thought, wryly, promised to be interesting—if not deadly. Then allowing the day's fatigue to overcome him, he fell easily asleep.

When he awakened, the variation in the moonlight pattern across the bed indicated only some fifteen minutes had passed, and his instinct told him that he was not alone in the room.

V

MIKE SHAYNE lay perfectly still, careful not to vary the tempo of his breathing. He was instantly awake, his every sense on the alert, waiting for some small sound that might indicate where the intruder was or give a hint of his intentions.

It had been a small sound that had awakened him. Of that, the detective was sure. So finely tuned was his sense of hearing that, like a cat, he would awaken instantly to any noise, however small, that did not belong in the environment.

His impression was that it had been a rustling of heavy fabric, and the only heavy fabric in the room was that of the half-open drapes at the french windows.

Whoever it was had to be behind the drapes. Carefully, Shayne turned his head on the pillow to be facing the windows and the lawn. The moonswept vista looked empty and innocent. He wished the draperies were not quite so opaque. As it

was, he had no indication as to which side of the room the intruder was on.

Over his carefully regulated breathing, Shayne heard a catch of breath that did not stem from his own throat. It was a sound as if its maker wished to cough but was afraid he would waken his prospective victim. It was small and it was not repeated, but it was enough.

The intruder was behind the curtains to the detective's left. Peering intently through the dimness, Shayne could make out a faint bulge in the pleated drapes such as might be made by a human body.

Slowly, Shayne drew his legs up under him until he was coiled like a spring, ready to leap from beneath the covers with the speed of a panther striking.

When he heard Shayne move, the detective reckoned, the intruder would expect attack from his left, where the curtains were partly open to admit the chill night air. Therefore, Shayne would attack from the other side, from the intruder's right along the wall, forcing him into the open.

Ever so faintly, the throat was cleared again, pinpointing the location of the unseen visitor—and with the sound, Shayne threw back the covers

and sprang from the bed in a single, swift move.

When his bare feet touched the carpet, he was within a yard of the drapes, and a second rapid lunge enabled Shayne to grasp an armful of curtains where the intruder lurked.

As Shayne hugged the unseen body within the heavy fabric, it slid from his grasp like a squeezed toy balloon. There was a desperate sound of hurried movements, as the invisible intruder pulled clear of the detective.

Then came the noise of feet scraping on metal and then thudding on stone as the intruder beat a hasty retreat through the open french window, across the flagged terrace beyond and over—the-lawn's slope in the moonlight.

By the time Shayne was able to peer through the opening, the intruder was in full retreat, racing across the turf with long strides. A large dog was leaping about him in rollicking fashion as the figure sprinted for the corner of the grounds where the gardener's cottage stood.

"Love Thy Neighbor," murmured the detective as the figure disappeared.

He knew now the intruder had to have Converse Snowden, the vitriolic and inquisitive

former owner of the Mark Bruce mansion. From his behavior, he had not been trying to get into the television star's big house. He had already been there, and evidently trapped in the downstairs guest bedroom when Shayne moved into it, and waiting for him to fall asleep to get out.

Equally interesting, to the detective's mind, was the friendliness of the Bruces' dog, an animal trained to deal viciously with intruders.

Interesting, he thought, even though it presented Shayne with new problems to solve though shedding no light on those already at hand.

The redhead sat on the bed, smoking a cigarette and puzzling over this new mystery. Why would Snowden prowl through the Bruce home? To Shayne, it seemed unlikely that a night visitor so eager to run away would present any real danger. But why break in at all?

Stubbing out his cigarette, Shayne swung back under the covers. A case of Occum's Law, the detective reasoned. Given a question with two opposing answers, the simplest answer is usually the right one. Converse Snowden was a meddling old man. His nocturnal prowl probably had nothing to do with Henson's problem.

Shayne slept soundly then, waking at a knock on the door and Brenda Bruce's resolutely cheerful voice informing him that it was time to get up for breakfast.

The weather was warm, clear and beautiful. The Indian summer was continuing long past its allotted span, for which Shayne was grateful.

Soon after breakfast Shayne left with his host for the studio. Mark Bruce sat behind the wheel of his huge white Cadillac.

Shayne noticed, as they drove on into West Philadelphia and the studio, that Bruce looked remarkably fit and alert for a man who had been sodden with drink less than eight hours earlier. In fact, the closer they got to the location of the broadcast, the more alert Bruce became. During the last few miles he actually sang a number of old popular ballads in an easy, undistinguished baritone.

The host took charge of the rehearsal that occupied the rest of the morning with a good natured efficiency that was the reverse of the martinet tradition of show business. The approach got results with amiability and left no rancor in its wake.

Bruce kept Shayne by his side while he checked over the band orchestrations for his own

numbers and then the specialty acts for the day. ". . . to get the feel and pace of the show," he explained.

He ran through a duet medley with a long, lithesome, coal-black girl singer. She was endowed with a remarkably clear soprano, and could cut musical rings around him, yet she seemed not to mind soft-pedalling her own greater talent of keep it in gear with his.

Shayne, who had occasionally watched the filming of television shows with Rourke and Henson in Miami scarcely believed it. There, he had seen star domination, resentment, smoldering tension and temperament. Here, thanks to the presence of a star aware of his own limitations and willing to accept them, was a completely happy troupe.

If Mark Bruce and Mar-Bru enterprises were in deep trouble, there was none during the long pre-performance ritual here. Nor were there any accidents.

There was a lunch break shortly after noon, and once again Shayne found himself paged. Answering the phone, he heard Henson's familiar voice.

"Dammit, Mike, we could have given you perfect protection at the hotel. When Brooks told me you had taken off with

the younger Bruces, I got a whole new set of grey hairs."

"Our agreement was a free hand," said Shayne, "and given the opportunity, it seemed best to stay close to the Bruces. Besides Mark Bruce's personal security seems excellent."

"Don't I know that!" exclaimed the executive. "I helped revise it after the accidents. Did you pick up anything worth reporting?"

The detective shrugged, said, "He seems under great strain. Drinks like a fish, but he was okay this morning. I suspect his only release is his work. The accidents don't seem to bother him."

"I wonder." Henson paused. "What do you feel about him now?"

"I like him," said Shayne. "So does everybody else," Henson said. "Anything else?"

What do you know about a man named Converse Snowden?"

"The former owner of Bruce's home? A real old-time Main Liner. In a time when the rich get richer, he has succeeded in completely blowing one of Philadelphia's oldest and wealthiest estates. Which, come to think of it, is a remarkable achievement—in a wholly negative way, of course. How did you happen to meet him?"

Shayne told him. As he re-

lated the suspected mealtime spying, the encounter on the lawn during his post-dinner stroll, and finally the nocturnal visit, Henson's silence grew increasingly cloudy.

As Shayne concluded, Henson asked, "Any idea why he was in the bedroom, Mike? Do you think he was snooping on you?"

"Possibility," said the detective. "But I think it's unlikely. How could he know I'd be put in that room? The sleeping arrangement was impromptu to the best of my knowledge. And Snowden was there before I came in."

"Why that particular room then?" Henson asked.

"I can give you two reasons," said Shayne. "One, the room is little used and is situated next to the living room, making it an excellent listening post. Two, it's on the ground floor and opens on the terrace and the lawn, making entrance and exit easier. I don't think it means anything. He's just a snooping, meddling, old man."

"I'll buy that," said the executive. "Well, tell me, what's your impression of Rich and Gloria?"

"Nothing, yet," Shayne said. "But I think the younger Mrs. Bruce was the mistress of Monte Cross before she married Richard. I know she was a professional motorcycle race

driver. Very interesting young lady."

"She's on the periphery," Henson told him. "A waif from western Iowa with a Phi Beta Kappa brain and no formal education to speak of. My guess is she's into the family for what she can get, willing to play ball as long as she's on the gravy train."

"You're right about her having been Monte Cross's mistress, too. He picked her up for a carnal act in the early days and she became his secretary."

"What about Mark's wife?" the detective asked.

Henson grunted. "Brenda seems to be just what she looks like—a former showgirl quite happy to play den mother and brood mare for Mark Bruce. A nice ordinary woman who is losing her looks and doesn't give a damn as long as she's comfortable."

"My impression, too," agreed Shayne. He looked at his wristwatch, said, "Duty calls, Oliver. First broadcast will be in a bare two hours. Plenty of work to be done. But tell me, you're in touch with the police, I presume. Has there been any trace of the murderer of the room-service waiter, Oliver?"

"Traces, yes, but no lead. Brooks and Carruthers tell me the police searched the room the shot was fired from. Who-

ever killed the waiter took no special care; left the cartridge case on the carpet. The room was directly across the court from yours, as you suspected."

"To whom was it registered?" Shayne asked.

"The whole floor is permanently reserved for guests of the Mark Bruce show. Last night, it was assigned to nobody. Mar-Bru owns the De Montfort, by the way."

"Another enterprise," said Shayne. "Okay, Oliver, I have to cut out now. I'll talk with you again soon."

VI

MIKE SHAYNE was the last to arrive at the green room pre-telecast meeting before the first of the two shows. Mark Bruce gave him a look of mild reproof before presenting him to the guests who would be in the conversational portion of the first day's show.

They included a Congregational minister, the Reverend William Peters; an author of a new best-selling book, Jacob Schilling; and a plump little butterball of a comedienne, Dodie Johns. Of them, only the last was familiar to the detective.

An utter and earthy extrovert onstage, Dodie Johns proved to be a mousy introvert



GLORIA BRUCE

when not performing, her raucous public voice a half-whisper in private. She had bright hennaed hair and pop eyes of faded blue and a multiplicity of facial bags and wrinkles she took no more pains to conceal than she did the grossness of her body.

She said, offering a moist, plump hand, "I'm the comic relief for this show. Though some people claim my jokes are a crime. Anyway, Red, I've been wanting to meet you for years. Every time I'm in Miami, I vow I'll look you up, but every time my nerve fails me."

Mark Bruce interrupted,

"Say! I'm going to use that today, kids! The idea of Dodie Johns losing her nerve over anything is going to rock the audience."

The Reverend Peters, a tall, lanky man whose lack of chin was compensated for by an emperor-sized Adam's apple, strolled over. "Where will I be sitting, Mark?"

"Oh, yes," Bruce said. "You'll be the second one out. That means you'll sit on my left."

Mark Bruce turned then to Shayne. "The Reverend Peters may be high in his church councils, but he's also a well known mystery writer under the name of Rogers Hall."

Jacob Schilling walked over. He was a sloppy, overweight middle-aged man with double-thick glasses, a double-thick brown mustache and double thick brown curly hair that sprouted around a bald spot on top of his head which reminded Shayne of a monk's tonsure. "Isn't having two writers a problem," he asked.

Bruce said, "No. No problem, Jake. First on will be Shayne, followed by Rogers Hall, then Dodie, then yourself. Hall's books are fiction, yours are fact."

The amiable and constructive banter continued until a red light flashed above the green room door. Mark Bruce rose to

his feet and said, "Okay, folks, we're on."

Mike Shayne got through the rehearsal with only the usual tenseness he felt during public appearances. Such rehearsed informality always seemed unreal to him.

The sense of unreality persisted through the post-performance interview with the press.

One reporter who bothered him most was a hawk-nosed young man from the *Bulletin* who kept asking Shayne if he was in Philadelphia for the broadcasts alone, or if he was more deeply connected with the murder than previously supposed. Shayne's "Just for the broadcasts," failed to satisfy him and he kept hammering away until Mark Bruce finally called a halt to the interviews.

"There's at least one in every city," he complained to the detective. "They do their damnedest to ascribe motives to us us we never even thought of. It's their bread and butter. You handled yourself like a veteran."

"I've been the subject of plenty of interviews," Shayne assured him. "And not just by reporters. The police can be rougher."

Monte Cross came into the green room, where the interview had taken place. He had

been viewing the show on the monitoring screens and was enthusiastic over the way Mike Shayne had come across.

"I never saw anyone show more cool in a debut," he said. He invited Shayne to visit the Hi-Son studios with him. Shayne readily accepted.

They drove to the recording studios in Cross' Continental.

The Hi-Son recording studios were contained in a low, windowless, soundproofed building further west in what the business manager explained was the former home of a space electronic factory that had gone out of business. As they walked from Cross' big black Continental to the entrance, the building squatted silent as a mausoleum in the moonlight.

They entered a corridor where two doors faced them across the way. Over one, a red light glowed. Cross led Shayne to the other door, opening it for the detective. The room they entered was an observation booth whose wide glass window overlooked a sunken studio.

The studio was a large, low room, its walls lined with ceramic tile, its floor cluttered with, to Shayne, a vast confusion of cables and elaborate electronic devices.

Shayne realized it would be easy enough to rig a control

boom like this to electrocute someone.

The detective recognized a pair of boom microphones, a half-dozen portable amplifiers and little else. There were perhaps a score of people in the room, lounging about sipping coffee or tinkering with the equipment, all of them clad in dungarees.

Save for a bearded young man on a platform who was tuning a fender bass, and a homely young female with confused dark blond hair that fell to her waist, it was impossible to distinguish the performers from the technicians.

In a booth directly across from their own, Shayne saw Richard Bruce seated behind what looked like a small organ keyboard, holding an earphone to his left ear. A reedy youth with coal black hair in a Mod cut held the other phone to his right ear.

The habitual sullenness had left the younger Bruce's face. His expression was one of intense concentration as he listened. Twice, he nodded and then, moments later, he held up a hand and made some small adjustments of invisible dials in front of him, listened again, then nodded at his companion, who nodded back.

"They're editing," said Cross. "Care to listen?"

He flipped a switch and Shayne heard Rich Bruce say, "How about we bring down the bass on bar seventeen so Maggi's voice floats over it easily?"

"Try it," said the youth with the Mod haircut. "We've tried everything else."

Frowning, Bruce punched a number of buttons. Faintly, as if in distant earphones, Shayne could hear a plaintive melody full of guitar chords and heartache, with the girl's lean tone barely surmounting it.

"Nope, won't do." Bruce shook his head. "Now listen to this. It's ancient history, but it's got what that part needs."

Abandoning the organ-like board, Bruce swiveled his chair around and rummaged in a shelf piled with small boxes. Shayne looked inquiringly at Cross, who said, "Cassettes."

Selecting one, Bruce inserted it in a small player next to the shelves, ran some of it silently, then motioned his companion to resume listening as he picked up his own earphone. A female voice sounded faintly but clearly, a voice fuller and huskier than that just played; a voice with the faintest undertone of an almost animal growl.

When Bruce shut it off, his friend said, "Jesus! What was

that? It's exactly what the spot needs!"

"Believe it or not," said Bruce with a trace of smugness, "That was recorded in Vegas almost twenty years ago. The record was never released..."

"Where'd you get it?" The rock leader sounded excited. "Man, if Maggi can do it..."

"You might say it runs in the family," said Bruce.

"I'll get Maggi up here." The other youth left the booth to reappear moments later on the floor below.

"I'll be God-damned!" said Cross.

"What was it?" Shayne asked.

"That was the last record Brenda cut before she quit Vegas to marry Mark. I wonder where Rich dug it up? I didn't even know it was still in existence."

"Judging from their reactions," said Shayne, "our friends over there seem to like it."

"They *should!*!" Cross spoke emphatically. "Brenda was a hell of a pop singer. She was only coming into her own when she quit."

"I understood she was just a showgirl," said the detective.

"She started in the line at the Dunes," the business manager told him. "But she didn't stay there long. She was on her

way up when she met Mark; hotter than he was at the time. He was still singing vocals with Walsh Redford's band when they met."

The girl with the long blond hair entered the booth with the reedy young man in the Mod haircut. They played the cassette for her and the detective heard her say, "Oh, wow, now if I can only make it..."

VII

AT SIX past two in the morning, Monte Cross pulled the black Continental up in front of Mark Bruce's Rosemont mansion. He and Shayne had lingered in the studio only until the homely girl singer had mastered the lick, not so well as the original but well enough to get by both her own group leader and Richard Bruce.

"It could be another gold platter," Cross remarked quietly as they drove away from the Hi-Son studio. He sighed, added, "I still wish Brenda would cut a single for us. With the right backing..."

"Maybe she prefers retirement," Shayne said.

"Not entirely, Mike. But she's been out of it so long. Getting her pipes back in shape would mean a long grind. And the work involved in recording nowadays! You have no idea!"

"I have some idea," said Shayne.

The intense concentration he had witnessed, the fine shadings, the perfectionism involved, had entirely altered his concepts as to how modern, back-beat jazz was put together and produced. It impressed him. It was as professional as his own work, and as complex.

"...and then there's the killing job of promoting a new talent, or, in Brenda's case, an old one that was never developed as a commercial property. Sure, we've got flacks for the publicity. But the inevitable tour of the nation's disc jockeys, their entertainment, the brown nosing—it would take at least six months."

Another sigh, then, "It's just a dream. Brenda's right not to undertake it. And there's the little matter of running Mark's home and bringing up the children..."

They were halted and checked at the gates of the big Bruce estate by a pair of wakeful-looking security guards before being admitted. As they proceeded up the driveway, Shayne peered out the car window then asked a question.

"Where are the dogs, Monte?" he said.

"They're out there roaming the grounds somewhere. We

keep them shut up in the kennel by day. I hope you're not a man who takes long walks in his sleep."

Shayne shook his head, said nothing. He was thinking of the dog that had silently romped at the heels of Converse Snowden when he beat his retreat from the ground-floor bedroom the night before. He knew what it took to establish friendly relations with such purposely dangerous creatures. Familiarity—long and carefully developed.

As they drew up in the turnaround in front of the house, Cross said, "They scare the hell out of me, Mike, mostly because they've been trained not to bark. I tell you, it's eerie to see them operate, even in a daytime training session. Well, here we are. Hope you found the evening interesting."

"Damned interesting," said Shayne laconically.

"Glad you're with us. I'm not coming in. It's a little too late for me."

Cross waited until Shayne was admitted by a sleepy looking sad-faced maid before driving away. The detective, feeling need of sleep himself, went directly to his bedroom of the night before. He was gratified to discover that his pajamas and robe were laid out on the opened bed. He undressed. It

had been a long day and evening.

And he had managed to see the scenes of two of the "accidents" plaguing the Mar-Bru executives. As far as Shayne could tell, it wouldn't require much effort for anyone to arrange the accidents. The vast number of technicians, stars, and general personnel made both Bruce's stage and the Hison recording studios wide open territory for a clever killer.

The same could be said of the hotel where the waiter was killed. That the waiter's death was connected, the detective was inclined to accept. At least, until he received information to the contrary. If so, who could have fired the shot? Any one, Shayne decided.

But there was a bigger question tacked on—why there had been no subsequent efforts to kill him. Since Shayne was considered dangerous enough to be the object of an attack so potentially risky to whoever instigated it, why was it not tried again?

The obvious answer was that, Shayne was no longer considered so dangerous as expected. Why? Two explanations suggested themselves; his attention had been directed into less harmful paths, or the murderer was simply biding his time for

a second try, making sure that it would not fail.

This brought Shayne's thinking back to the invasion of this room the night before by Converse Snowden. He had not seriously considered the crackpot as a killer. He could hardly have penetrated the Montfort without being noticed and probably recognized; he was too distinguished, not to say too eccentric looking, a figure to have escaped some attention.

Snowden's spying from his window with field glasses was understandable, considering his position as former owner and disgruntled seller. But his nocturnal presence was a different matter. It was unlikely that he would have risked eavesdropping on any basis regular enough to be effective.

His eyes narrowing, Shayne slid off the edge of the bed and stood up. Slowly, carefully, he studied the room in detail, with the drapes drawn tight against any possible observation from outside.

Another possible motive for the invasion had occurred to him.

Snowden could be feeding information to someone. If so, maybe his prying went beyond field glasses and nighttime visits.

Had Snowden been a professional electronic eavesdropper,



MIKE SHAYNE

Shayne might never have found it.

The tiny electronic listening device Shayne located was affixed to the wall next to a ventilation shaft in the bathroom. Hidden in part by the toilet, it was a recent model with its own deceptively simple looking printed circuits set in plastic and its own tiny modular long-lived battery.

On his knees on the bathmat after returning it, Shayne remained perfectly still while he tried to figure why this particu-

lar location in the huge house should have been selected for the bug—selected by a man who had been brought up here and presumably knew the best spot for such a device.

The ventilating screen low in the wall, evidently designed as an air filter, provided the answer.

Through it, the detective could hear the irregular flow of human voices. Higher in the side wall of the bathroom was a switch. Reaching upward, Shayne turned it, saw the fan begin to turn with a hum that effectively blocked out all other sounds.

Smiling, he turned it off. The hum faded and the voice became audible once more. The bug might be effectively located he decided, but it was easy to negate it simply by turning on the fan. He put his ear to the wall.

The voices had ceased and, for a moment, Shayne thought the conversation had ended. But then they started again.

They were faint, but clear. He found he could even identify the individuals.

The first was unmistakably that of Gloria Bruce, saying, "...at him, lying there like a sodden hulk on the sofa. Night after night."

Brenda's fuller, huskier tones cut in, edged with resentment.

"Can you blame him?" She said. "With what they're doing to him? If he laid awake all night worrying about it, he wouldn't be able to do the show. And the show is all that's keeping him going, poor dear. That's why this...skimming you mention. . . My God, Gloria, his own brother!"

Gloria's voice took on an edge, "Rich is no thief. He couldn't help going broke and you know it."

"He could have if you'd stepped in," said Brenda.

"How could I? And what about those gambling debts you've been running up, sweetheart? Maybe you're the one pulling out the money, darling."

The *darling* was edged with sarcasm so sharp that it cut.

"What do you know about my gambling?" Brenda asked.

"I know," said Gloria, "that you owe Milan Thomas's book more than eighty grand. And God only knows how much on the others. You blew six thousand, four hundred and twenty-two dollars and forty-three cents right in front of me when you laid those long shots on the Gold Cup at Belmont last month."

"How do you know that?" Brenda sounded incredulous. "I didn't add it up and I didn't keep a record."

"I heard you make the bets and I read the payoff odds the next day. Two and two together. Simple.

"Why don't you mind your own business?" said Brenda, obviously unhappy. "Why don't you straighten out Rich? That's what's making a drunkard out of Mark."

"Because I can't!" Gloria's tone was defiant. "Let's close it, will you? We've been over it twenty times tonight alone, sweetie, without getting anywhere."

"Because you won't help!" Brenda Bruce accused her sister-in-law.

"Because I *can't*! It's too damned big and dangerous. Do you think all those 'accidents' were really accidents, dear? *Oh-oh!* The drunkard stirs. You may have the privilege of putting your husband to bed, darling. For all the good it does you when you get him there."

"God, but you're vicious!" Brenda said bitterly. Evidently Goria left the room, which Shayne surmised to be Mark Bruce's study from his visit of the night before. There were grunting sounds from the television star, soothing words from his spouse, then silence.

Shayne got up from sore knees. He turned off the bathroom and bedroom lights and once again sat on the edge of

the bed, sifting and weighing what he had just overheard. The lawn was silver bright and black shadowed in the moonlight as it had been the night before. Not a cloud was evident in the visible sky, not a whisper of wind stirred hedge or tree.

Under the circumstances, Shayne could better understand and even condone Mark Bruce's nightly drinking to excess. He could even feel some sympathy toward Brenda's reckless gambling losses.

It could not have been easy, after abandoning a promising career as a beautiful young pop singer loaded with talent, to settle into the minor role of being Mrs. Mark Bruce. It was evidently a role to which she was not especially suited by background, training or inclination. Her slack housekeeping and unimaginative meal planning indicated as much in the detective's mind.

Shayne could feel sympathy for her. But toward Gloria Bruce, his feelings were less ambivalent.

A former carnny motorcycle race driver, Monte Cross's admitted former mistress, she belonged to that tough, adventuress mold of American female as well known to the detective as to every law-enforcement officer in the land.

Not that she was necessarily criminal. A goodly percentage of such women wound up in highly respected professional and social positions. Not a few had become highly placed executives, career women or entertainment stars. Not all wound up as the Bonnies in *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Nonetheless, come morning and before the show, as soon as he had access to a less "public" phone, Shayne resolved to put under way his own private investigation of Goria Bruce. He had no idea of what might turn up, but if any of it were pertinent to the present situation, it would be valuable.

There was also the little matter of her having to some degree the mind of a mathematical wizard. The way in which she had calculated Brenda's racing losses in the Belmont Gold Cup certainly indicated such a talent, and Shayne agreed with Oliver Henson at the necessity for such a specialized gift in the Mar-Bru skimming racket.

Yet Shayne found the forthright Gloria more appealing than her more outwardly virtuous sister-in-law. She was certainly more open.

It was then that he heard the sound of a shot through the now-open french windows.

It was muffled. It came from

a distance. A less expert observer might have taken it for granted as an automobile backfire, especially when the sound of a well-tuned automobile engine started and settled into a low-pitched purr. It rose briefly, fell steady again as the car was put into motion, then faded away. It sounded as if it came from somewhere near the gardener's cottage occupied by Converse Snowden.

Quickly, Shayne pulled on a pair of trousers over his pajama bottoms, and stepped barefoot out on the flagged terrace.

The warmth of the November day had long since faded and the night was chill. Adrenals pumping, Shayne barely noticed this minor discomfort. Step by step, he moved slowly out across the slope of the lawn, ready should any of the watchdogs come loping out of the darkness.

None did.

Shayne found three of the dogs at the foot of the lawn, lying on their sides closed to the evergreen fence. They were alive but unconscious. Bits of meat were discernible scattered about where they lay, snoring loudly.

Quietly then, Shayne entered the gardener's cottage. The sight that greeted his eyes was a grim one.

VIII

WALKING SO AS NOT TO STEP IN the gruesome mess, Mike Shayne went on into a hall dimly illuminated by the kitchen light. He spotted a telephone on a small table inside the front door, picked it up and began to dial the Police Emergency number. Then he hesitated, cut the call and dialed Oliver Henson's private number.

"My God, Mike!" said a sleepy TV executive when the call got through. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Sorry, Oliver," said the detective. "I'm in Converse Snowden's house. Somebody just shot him dead in his own kitchen."

"Somebody *what*? I don't believe it!"

"You heard," said Shayne.

"Oh my God! This means..."

"It means I'd better call the police this time. Even my friend O'Loughlin won't go along with not questioning me this time. And wouldn't ask him to. Twice is too much."

A long silence, then, "I suppose you're right, Mike."

"The case has gotten out of hand, Oliver," Shayne pointed out.

"You're right, dammit! Okay, go ahead. Any idea who killed Snowden?"

"Not so far. It only happened."

There was nothing more to say. After hanging up, the detective dialed the Police Emergency number and informed the male voice that answered, "This is Mike Shayne. May I speak to my friend, Detective Lieutenant Dennis O'Loughlin, please."

It took a few minutes, for O'Loughlin was asleep at home. He finally came on, sounding peeved, said, "Good to hear your voice! It's been a long time. Dammit, Mike, I wondered if you'd ever call. But you certainly picked a hell of a time to do it."

His mock resentment vanished as Shayne told him in crisp definitive sentences what had happened and where he was. The Philadelphia detective said, "I'll be there in twenty minutes. I'll send the Homicide boys on ahead, Mike."

Shayne smiled faintly as he hung up. He no longer felt alone in a sea of strangers, knowing the familiar machinery was getting under way.

Within six minutes, a patrol car arrived, its siren silent, and two blue-coated officers were on the scene. Then came another car, followed by the Medical Examiner's ambulance, and then O'Loughlin by himself.

The two old friends sat in the living room together while the grisly routine of removing the body was performed with quiet efficiency. O'Loughlin listened attentively while Shayne reviewed the difficult situation.

"Jesus!" exclaimed O'Loughlin when Shayne concluded. "So that's what was behind that sniping at the hotel! I should have known there was more to it when those shifty-eyed Mar-Bru lawyers were so insistent you knew nothing about it.

"I wish you had told me all this earlier. Mike, you know we should have been called immediately. Nobody likes having his hands tied, and dammit, Mike, you know what the laws are relating to withholding evidence."

"Yeah," Shayne said, "I know, Dennis. But I really didn't have any evidence to give you. You learned all that I knew. And I wanted a free hand to do some more snooping."

"Well, it's all water under the bridge now," O'Loughlin admitted. "And as to the previous accidents or whatever they were, there isn't a thing I can do as long as Mar-Bru and its officials are stonewalling the matter. No move we can make without some complaint. But the press is bound to dig out

the facts. They'll start snooping now for sure. Two murders, both connected with Mark Bruce? You'd better believe they'll dig until the story comes to light."

"I'm aware of that, said Shayne, "but try to keep my role as quiet as possible if you can."

"Will do, and can do," the Philadelphia cop said, "providing you can give me your personal word you know nothing beyond what you've told me."

"What I know is all theory," Shayne said, "But I'm starting to get a glimer of what may be the truth."

An officer reported to O'Loughlin, said, "The dogs will be okay, sir. They had enough drugs to put a team of horses to sleep, but they'll be coming to soon."

"You might search the cottage for recording tape," suggested Shayne. "Snowden had my bathroom bugged. It's a good central listening post for the whole ground floor. There may be other bugs, too, though I doubt it. But I'd like to know what he picked up that might have caused his murder—if our friend hasn't already removed the records."

"Which he probably has."

"He or she," said Shayne, rising from his chair.

"Mike keep me posted,"

O'Loughlin said, then added, "When this mess is over with, let's have dinner or a drink together." Shayne returned the policeman's grin. "Right, Dennis."

Shortly afterward, Shayne stepped by the sleeping dogs carefully and made his way back to the still unaroused big house.

Mark and Brenda Bruce were at breakfast when Shayne joined them shortly after nine o'clock the next morning. They had heard the news of the murder via the morning TV news programs and were visibly shaken.

Shayne feigned ignorance and reacted accordingly. He could not help wondering if the others weren't doing the same. He decided that, for the time being, there was no way of telling.

Brenda made the first mention of the murder over the rim of her coffee cup. "I feel awful about poor Mr. Snowden. I have to admit I didn't think he was an ideal neighbor. He was always snooping around. But I didn't wish *that* on him. Not seriously, anyway."

Her still pretty face looked puffy and worn beneath the careful makeup that did its best to conceal the ravages of what had obviously been a miserable night. If he had not lis-

tened in on her talk with Gloria, the night before, Shayne would have suspected a deeper concern over the news of the murder than was the actual case.

Mark Bruce, as on the previous morning, looked relatively fit and rested.

When he and Shayne were alone in his car, he said, "Frankly, Mike, I'm more curious than sorry about poor old Snowden. He was a nuisance. I only hope the publicity to two murders like these are bound to get doesn't hurt the show."

Thereafter, the subject was dropped and the TV star discussed the guests scheduled to be on the broadcast that afternoon. They included Buck Taylor, whose "007"-style spy series was a current hit, Jerry Martini, a Police Chief from the Midwest, and Rita Alonzo a petite Latin film starlet who had come into her own as the dancing, singing star of a hit Broadway musical.

The special added attraction was Dr. Thor Hedwigssen, a noted Swedish psychic who claimed to have solved more than a score of murders via his parapsychological gifts.

"Frankly," Bruce told Shayne, "I think the man's a phony. He never lists his failures, and I'm told he has plenty. But the audience eats it

up, and we thought you and he could have some interesting discussion on scientific detection against the supernatural."

"I believe in logic more than E.S.P.," smiled Shayne. "But intuition can be of help at times."

"You know," said Bruce, "it might be interesting to ask him who killed Converse Snowden."

"You're kidding!" said Shayne.

"No harm asking," said the talk show host seriously. "Besides, the murders have a topical value and we are involved, if only indirectly."

Bruce continued tooling the big Cadillac through the mid-morning traffic while Shayne lapsed into silence. The detective was considering the presence of Thor Hedwigssen on the upcoming show and what, if anything, could be made of it.

Shayne was well and long acquainted with the psychic's record as a solver of crimes, which had been widely publicized in a pair of well-documented books. The Swedish seer had also been seen on a number of TV shows that added greatly to his income as author, investigator and platform lecturer.

Thus far, where Mike Shayne was concerned, the jury was still out on Dr. Hedwigssen. In the course of his many years as

a private investigator, Shayne had run into a number of bizarre events whose interpretation seemed to defy all of logic.

Mark Bruce introduced Shayne to the Scandinavian psychic. The other three who were to participate in the talk portion of the show were without exception the almost diametric reverse of their public personalities: Super Spy-hero Buck Taylor was a shrinking violet of a man, Chief Jerry Martini seemed unable to raise his voice above a hoarse whisper, while the fiery Rita Alonzo looked like a shopworn seamstress in a garment factory. The light badinage of the day before, despite Mark Bruce's efforts to lift the session's tone, was lamentably absent.

Nor did the fourth guest, the man in whom Shayne was genuinely interested, add cheer to the occasion.

Thor Hedwigssen was a mountain of a man with the uncombed grey locks of an English Sheepdog hanging low over his forehead. He sat slouched in an ill-fitting, grey, worsted suit as if the cares of the world rested upon his shoulder.

For about a moment, when Shayne was introduced, light glowed to make embers of the Seer's pale grey eyes. In heav-

ily accented but grammatically correct English, he said, "Mister Shayne, I have heard of you."

The implication was that he had heard of none of the others and the remark did little to soothe any ruffled feathers. Shayne looked covertly at their host, who widened his eyes and pursed his lips to agree silently with Shayne's unuttered suggestion that the show ahead promised to prove heavy going.

The quasi-rehearsal more than fulfilled this promise. At its conclusion, Rita Alonzo summed it up, saying, "Well, fellow sufferers, if this is the final run-through, it should be one hell of a show. I never died through a worse rehearsal."

Shayne could have cared less. His entire purpose was concentrated on getting a few minutes alone with Thor Hedwigssen. He had decided upon a course of action which, he hoped, might—just might—break the impasse of inaction into which he had fallen. He had visited the scenes of the crimes, met the principles—and now was the time for action.

IX

FROM THE OUTSET, the actual telecast proved to be as much a dud as the rehearsal. Time and again, Mark Bruce tried to pick up the tempo and brighten the

talk segments as each guest came on, but time and again, the supposedly bright chatter fell flat.

Had it not been for the specialty acts, which were excellent, the show might have been a total disaster.

Dr. Hedwigssen was the last guest to come on, and Shayne hoped there was still an audience tuned in—especially the three persons toward one of whom his conversation with the seer was directed. If Mark did not lead into discussion of the Converse-Snowden shooting, Shayne intended to do the job.

In front of the audience, the somber Scandinavian lit up like a switched-on lamp. He proved to be a highly entertaining raconteur, spicing his more serious pronouncements on parapsychological phenomena with the proper amount of self-depreciation to win over the house completely.

He described the Nobel prize winning physicist who had consulted him as to the whereabouts of a missing formula. Hedwigssen had told him that he saw the folded piece of paper enveloped in some woven fabric, about to be plunged into foaming waters.

"Oh, my God!" the scientist had cried and dashed from the psychic's office—barely in time to retrieve the lost formula

from the breast pocket of a shirt where he had absentmindedly stuck it, just as the maid was about to put the shirt into the automatic clothes washer.

"Thus," Dr. Hedwigssen concluded, "the basis of a new explosive was saved from oblivion, so that, if all goes well, the world may blow itself up more efficiently."

There were other anecdotes—of a man for whom the seer had found a wife who had deserted him, only to have the man leave home shortly after the spouse had returned to his bed and board; of a famed novelist whose master opus vanished before it could be copied and which Hedwigssen, through a psychic flash, revealed had been inadvertently removed as wastepaper by the trash man and fortunately not yet burned or recycled.

And finally there was murder.

Under Mark's prodding, the huge Scandinavian told the fascinating story of his work with a baffled Stockholm police force in the identification and capture of a strangler who had slain seventeen young women in the "Venice of the North" and raped them after they were dead.

Then Mark Bruce said, "We had a murder here in Philadelphia last night, almost right

outside my house in Rosemont. As far as I know it is still unsolved. Can you give us any information on that one which might help the police find the murderer?"

For a split instant, the grey eyes flashed toward Shayne's direction, and then Hedwigssen's massive personality became wholly serious. He seemed to grow even bigger than he was and his domination of entertainers, technicians and audience was absolute. The strange, light grey eyes seemed to flash fire as he looked not at but through them, turning his head slowly as if to pan a room he no longer even saw.

His voice dropped to a lower register as he spoke slowly, saying, "I see the small house at night. I see the light in the kitchen. I see two men, the victim facing the light; the other's back to it. The victim is tall, a tall old man. His murderer is much shorter but he holds a rifle in his hands. The old man is defying his enemy to use it, telling him he lacks the—what is the word?—the guts to use it.

"This is foolish, for it causes the murderer to shoot. The bullet hits the old man in the chest, and he falls forward. The killer looks at what he has done. He says, Oh, Jesus! But he had it coming to him."

"Then he leaves the room

and the house by the front door. A large Cadillac of some light color is waiting there in front and he drives away in it." A pause, then, "That is all I see for now. The image is fading.

He seemed to lose size as the fire slowly left him, leaving merely the massive, impassive Scandinavian in its wake. There was silence onstage and in the house, spellbound silence. The show was then concluded.

Shayne was not spellbound. He was curious. Later, at the De Montfort Hotel, where, apparently, all of Mark Bruce's out-of-town guests were quartered, Shayne managed to buttonhole the seer in a corner of the lobby. Hedwigssen looked down at Shayne with a trace of smugness.

"I did well, ja?" he asked.

Shayne merely said, "Doctor, where did you get all the conversational details?"

"I hear them!" The parapsychologist's manner and tone were vibrant with sincerity.

"And describing a light colored Cadillac as the getaway car?"

"I saw a white Cadillac," said the seer, beginning to radiate irritation at being questioned.

The detective stared into the seer's grey eyes and read the sincerity in them. Right or wrong, the seer's "vision" had

set the wheels of Shayne's mind turning. He had the prickly feeling that came with his hunches—when logic, seemingly blocked, was dropped and his instinct leaped forward.

He turned from the elevators, went to the phone booths, dialed Oliver Henson's number. The *ATV* executive, who had evidently watched the broadcast, was curious about the Scandinavian seer but Shayne interrupted him.

"Oliver, can you tell me off-hand what Mark Bruce's net earnings were for last year?"

"Lower than you'd expect—a lot lower. They've been the same the two previous years. The corporation can't allow him deductions on his wife's gambling losses and his expenses have been very heavy since he bought the big house in Rosemont."

It was all Shayne needed. Thanking Henson, he hung up, headed again for the elevators. When he reached the penthouse suite, Monte Cross let him in.

Shayne said, "Monte, if you were Mark Bruce, where would you be right now?"

Cross seemed already defeated. "What tipped you off, Mike?"

"The white Cadillac bit started me thinking in another direction. Then the fact that, for a man who drank himself to

sleep every night, Mark seemed remarkable fit in the morning. When I found out his net income had dropped to virtually nil despite his huge earnings, I began to get a new set of answers. How long have you been covering for him?"

"I haven't been really—consciously at any rate." The business manager had visibly aged in the past few minutes. "I couldn't admit it, of course, I simply couldn't. I love that man, Mike. He's a good man..."

A pause, then "And he simply hasn't the brain for a skimming operation. It works like this—somebody has to know the right people, or maybe you'd call them the wrong ones. Orders have to be falsified: delivery, say, of six recording components instead of the two needed. Four are returned, and the money refunded, all but the cut of the accomplice involved. And that money simply vanishes into thin air."

"Record prices to big dealers are cut in a number of ways, and the difference between list and discount prices is skimmed off. With larger outlets, or even a lot of small ones, this can be sizeable. There are dozens of ways of milking both ends of any deal in this business—but only if somebody holds all the

strings. Either in secret books or, better yet, in somebody's head.

"That's why I couldn't believe it was Mark. I still can't. He can barely add four and four and get eight. Sure, he's been boiling because I'm richer than he is. Mark's present position is a lot like that of Johnny Carson a few years ago. On the *Tonight Show*, everybody from Ed McMahon to Doc Severinson was getting rich, while Carson was only netting peanuts out of all that salary and publicity.

"But Mark couldn't have done it even if he'd wanted to. He simply isn't a businessman." A sigh, then, "It was that bitch, of course. Gloria always wanted to make a big killing. Money, not murder, I mean. She knew I'd never let her get away with it, so she moved in on Rich. When she saw she hadn't a real chance with Rich, she moved in on Mark. That's about the time Brenda began playing the ponies."

Shayne and the business manager exchanged a long hard look. The detective knew there had to be more than that behind Monte Cross's not putting a stop to the skimming operation before it could get well under way. Either he couldn't or he wouldn't. If he wouldn't,

it probably meant he was in on the take.

But this too, was at variance with Shayne's reading of the organizer of Mar-Bru Enterprises. For one thing, the business manager was rich and seemed quite contented with the status quo. He'd been covering his own tracks from the first, as well as Mark Bruce's tracks.

This meant that his hands had been tied. Why? It was, of course, a big question, a good one. The redhead had a hunch he would never learn it from Monte Cross. The cool, hard look the business manager had exchanged with him indicated to Shayne that, whatever it was, it lay buried somewhere deep in the past. Probably, Gloria had something on him, as he undoubtedly had something on her.

Shayne said, "Gloria?"

Monte Cross said nothing but a slight smile lightened his expression, and the detective read it as an assent. He nodded slightly, then picked up the phone.

When he got Dennis O'Loughlin, he said, "Dennis, I think you'd better pick up Mark Bruce and bring him here to Cross' penthouse at the De Montfort.

"You got something?" the cop asked.

"Something on her. I'll explain later," Shayne said.

"You might put out another A.P.B. on his sister-in-law, Gloria Bruce, too," Shayne added.

"Will do," said O'Loughlin

Then before hanging up, Shayne turned to Cross, repeated an earlier question. "Monte, if you were Mark Bruce right now, where would you go?"

Monte frowned, then said, "Mark has a small plane at a private airfield near Germantown. If I were in his place, God forbid, I'd probably try for it that way. They must have some emergency getaway plans. Gloria wouldn't operate without them."

Mike Shayne passed this bit of information on to O'Loughlin. The big detective lieutenant said, "Thanks, Mike, I'll go out there myself. I know where the place is."

"I'd like to be along" Shayne stated.

"I'll meet you at the hotel —Give me five minutes," O'Loughlin acceded.

Shayne took off for the elevator to join an inquisitive Dennis O'Loughlin, who quickly arrived.

Shayne halted the policeman's questions with, "I'll explain later, Dennis. Right now, let's get to that air strip."

O'Loughlin looked startled, but the urgency in Shayne's voice convinced him to move first and question later.

The big Philadelphia detective led Shayne quickly to a police sedan waiting outside with a uniformed patrolman seated behind the wheel. They drove with a siren screaming to cut a quicker path through the West Philadelphia traffic.

They had progressed barely a half dozen blocks when the car telephone at O'Loughlin's elbow uttered its summons. The big detective picked it up, listened, said, "Okay, you're sure?" Then, after listening, "Well, keep me posted—and keep looking."

He turned to Shayne as he hung up, said, "We're ahead of them at the airport, Mike. Bruce's plane has just been fueled up and is waiting, but no sign of him yet."

Shayne nodded, said nothing.

He concentrated upon a single subject, sifting through recent memories like a man leafing through a telephone book in search of a number he desperately wanted, turning page after page. Something was wrong, he couldn't tell what.

He sifted through near-total recall of the day of his arrival, of the first dinner at the Rosemont mansion, of the room-service waiter's murder at

the hotel, of his return to Rosemont, of his turning in, of his discovery of Converse Snowden lurking behind the bedroom curtains, of the conversation he had overheard...

He stopped right there, sensing that he had passed it again. When? And where? His recall ran in reverse, back past the intruder business to his chat with the TV host in his study back to Gloria and Brenda's conversation: . . . and there it remained, fixed and focused.

To O'Loughlin, Shayne said, "Dennis, we must get to Rosemont first. How fast can we get there?"

Having accepted Shayne's lead, O'Loughlin now followed it blindly. It took no time at all. As they skidded to a halt in the driveway in front of the big house, the sound of a shot rang out.

The front door was locked and Mike Shayne wasted no time waiting for it to be forced or answered. Moving with unexpected speed, his legs pistonning, he led the way around the house to where the rows of french windows offered free entry, quickly forced those of the room in which he had slept the last two nights.

The scene that greeted him when he reached Mark Bruce's study offered a tableau in arrested violence. Rich Bruce

half-sat, half-lay on a corner of the sofa with blood streaming through the fingers that clutched his upper left arm. Gloria Bruce stood in front of the bookcases of the far wall, rifle in hand pointed unwaveringly at her husband.

As Shayne reached the doorway, Gloria said, "Mark, you're not going to let this weakling stop us now, are you?"

What Mark Bruce might have replied remained in the limbo of unuttered responses, for at the moment Gloria became aware of the presence of the intruders. Her face wearing the cold mask of the ferocity of a striking cat, she swung the rifle unerringly toward Shayne's stomach.

He said coldly, "It's too late, Gloria."

She continued her move and Shayne heard the click of O'Loughlin's Magnum revolver at his elbow. At that moment, the usually mild-mannered Mark Bruce turned into a tiger.

Taking advantage of the diversion, he leaped at Gloria with the speed and fury of outraged desperation. Grabbing the gun-barrel as she pressed the trigger, he caused the bullet to deflect into the ceiling, then pulled the weapon from her grasp and tried to ram the butt into her stomach.

She cried, "You bastard!"

and, with the strength of sheer fury, wrested it back. There was a moment of wild melee and then it went off again and Gloria sank to the carpet with blood beginning to well through the close-fitting pullover that covered her torso.

Mark Bruce looked at her for a moment, then politely offered the rifle, butt-end first, to Shayne. He said, "I'm afraid you're a little too late, Mike, but thank God you got here at all!"

BEFORE SHAYNE took the return trip to Miami, there was a great deal of wrap-up work to be done. Rich Bruce was not seriously hurt but Gloria never recovered consciousness, dying the Bryn Mawr hospital less than twenty-four hours later.

Brenda Bruce, who had fortuitously been shopping when the fatal shoot-in occurred, was in a state of nervous collapse in a room on the same floor as her sister-in-law had been.

It was Friday, over a luncheon table at the Bellevue Stratford, that Shayne, Oliver Henson and Dennis O'Loughlin had their final meeting. On the whole, the TV executive was well pleased with the outcome of the case and handed the detective an envelope containing a check.

"You deserve this, and more," he explained as he offered it across the table. But it was the best I could do."

Shayne smiled, and returned the envelope unopened. "There's no need to pay me."

"I want to, Mike," Henson pressed. "I can well afford it. And you sure as hell earned it. Do me a favor," he grinned. "Take it. I'll get a tax write off."

Shayne grinned and pocketed the envelope.

O'Loughlin took a drink, then, "One thing still puzzles me, Mike. Why didn't they just take off after the show? Why did they stop so long at the house?"

"They needed getaway loot and Mark had two hundred thousand dollars stashed in his safe. The rest was scattered in banks all over the world, as you know. Then Richard Bruce caught them there and you can guess the rest. Mark came out from under Gloria's spell when she shot Rick to keep him from interfering any more, just as we drove up. Unfortunately for her, Rich had already delayed them long enough so that we could intercept them.

"The fueled up plane was just a decoy. They had another getaway planned—or rather, Gloria had. Using a station wagon to get across New Jersey

to where she had a launch waiting to take them to a Panamanian freighter off shore."

Henson looked down at the remains of the chicken leg Philadelphia mixed grill on his plate, largely uneaten. "What I don't understand, Mike, is why Mark and Gloria would try skimming. Hell, his credit isn't too bad. Sure, the corporation wouldn't have loaned him anything, but he could have gone to any of a half dozen banks and borrowed enough to pay off Gloria's debts. And...well, hell, I guess he just got greedy."

"Right," Shayne agreed. "Greed. Oliver, you can boil most premeditated crime down to one simple motive. Greed. The greed got him going, and he probably had hopes that by working it right, he could pass the buck off on you, leave you holding the bag. Then you called me. Mark admitted overhearing the conversation. By coincidence, he had picked up the phone on the same line you used.

When I came on the scene, he and Gloria panicked. They tried murdering me, and when that failed and when Monte Cross put me up at their home, they lost their nerve. They couldn't risk killing me at their own home.

"But they killed Snowden. Killed him, because they found

out some way he was snooping on them and might have heard too much. It may even be that they saw him running across the lawn the night I surprised him.

"However that may be," the redhead continued, "Hedwigson's little revelation on the air finished them. Mark Bruce never did have much courage. Gloria, like Lady MacBeth, was the driving force."

"And it was Gloria who actually did the killing?" Henson asked.

"The female always was deadlier than the male," O'Laughlin grinned wryly.

"You know," Henson said, leaning back in his chair, "it's really quite a thing. I mean, Hedwigson's vision. Maybe there's something to this

parapsychic business after all."

"Could be," Shayne responded, "but I still prefer logic."

"And hard evidence," O'Laughlin added.

"But what finally tipped you off to Gloria's dominant role?" Henson asked after setting down his glass.

"Easy," Shayne said. "I heard her confess, without knowing it. I overheard her and Brenda talking, and Brenda referred to the 'skimming' Gloria had mentioned. An operation only Oliver Henson knew of, if I believed you."

"So here's to logic," Henson said, lifting his glass.

"And the City of Brotherly—Death" responded Mike Shayne.

The three men drank to the toast.

MIKE SHAYNE Presents

Next Month's Headliners

TIMETABLE FOR TROUBLE by BRETT HALLIDAY
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THE DEVIL AND CARLO GAMBINO by DAVID MAZROFF
A True Crime Mafia Masterpiece

NIGHT CALL

Dying once, and trying twice, and dying once again: Symmon tried a long, long time . . .

by
**FRANK D.
McSHERRY JR.**



IT WAS getting late. He should have phoned some time ago. Phillip Barney put two ham-and-cheese sandwiches on a tray and looked out the kitchen window. Symmon's lights were on, his garage black, empty, waiting.

Of their three neighbors, one was on vacation, one working at the hospital, one at her weekly church social. So who could Symmon call but Barney?

Barney was pouring coffee when the phone rang. He put

the cup on the tray, took the tray to the kitchen table, and picked up the phone on its fifth ring.

"Barney?" Symmon's voice was hoarse, melodramatic. "I'm gonna put my head in the oven and turn the gas on!"

"What, again?" Barney said wryly.

He closed the kitchen door and sat down, leaning the wooden chair back against the door and putting his feet on the table. They were big feet; he

was a tall, lean man with slow, precise movements.

"Didn't you hear what I said? I'm gonna kill myself!"

"Oh, come off it," Barney said. "You always call someone first so they can get help for you. The last time, you called Mrs. Evans, and the ambulance got here so fast you hardly had time to swallow your pills."

"Those pills," said Symmon indignantly, "were poison."

"Sure. How long were they in you—two minutes? You just pull these stunts to make your wife feel guilty."

The second time he'd tried it was the first time he'd phoned Barney. He'd popped his head in the oven and barely had time to pass out before the respirator squad got there. Symmon escaped with nothing more than a mild headache.

His wife, a soft, helpless-looking blonde, nearly had a nervous breakdown. It was a month before she even mentioned divorce to him again.

"I cut my wrists one time!" Symmon cried. "I got scars!"

"Uh-huh. After phoning the only neighbor you've got who's a registered nurse. When the doctor got there it was your wife he treated."

"She's cheating on me," Symmon said slyly.

"That's what you thought last week. Then you found out

she'd been downtown at a Salvation Army bargain sale, for God's sake."

"I know she is! I saw her yesterday, downtown. She didn't know I saw her. She bought him a tie, a red one with brown spots. She didn't have it when she got home. Barney, she gave it to someone right in this block! A Judas right in this block, visiting my home, drinking my coffee—"

"For God's sake," Barney said. "Look, every man in town has a red tie with brown spots." He looked down at his tie. "Hell, I'm wearing one now. Well, it's *almost* red. Reddish-orange anyway."

"I'm not accusing you, Barney," Symmon said quickly.

"Thanks—"

"I know you work on the swing shift, and that's usually when she's alley-catting around."

"—for nothing."

"Oh, I'm not going to stand for it anymore, Barney," Symmon said. "You tell her that, when I'm dead and gone. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to lock the garage door, stuff rags under it till it's airtight, turn on the gas—and end my hurts."

"Now wait a minute, Symmon." Barney took his feet off the table. "Listen, I'll just come over there and open the door—"

"You haven't got a key," Symmon said. "Think how long it'll take you to break into a garage."

He hung up. Barney got to the kitchen window just in time to see the garage door swing down. He swore quietly to himself.

It was about time for Symmon's wife to come home, and she'd have a key to the garage, and she'd open the door; and there'd be Symmon stretched out melodramatically on the floor; and she'd probably have a breakdown or two. And if for any reason she was late getting there, Barney would arrive with the cops anyway;

Symmon was taking no real risks.

Barney put another cup of coffee on the tray, picked it up, left the kitchen and went down the hall to the bedroom.

"Is it time for me to go?" Symmon's wife sat up, pink, bare and pretty.

"No, he won't miss you for an hour yet," Barney said easily.

"I'm so glad they put you on the daytime shift," she said softly. "It gives us so much more time."

She reached for a sandwich. "Who was that on the phone?"

"A wrong number. Someone who thought he'd called up a friend."



READ--This Great New Detective Story Next Month:

TIMETABLE FOR TERROR

A Brand New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

The red-headed private eye finds himself engaged in a deadly tug of war with both Will Gentry's Miami detectives and a ruthless kidnapper whose demands do not stop at murder!

Dangerous things happen in alleys to vixens that prowl.

SCREAM of the CAT

by CARL HENRY RATHJEN

THE WOMAN'S SCREAM pierced the quiet night.

Ed Allen jumped up from the manuscript he'd been revising. Squinting as he ran to the door of his recently rented home, his eyes were ready for darkness when he dashed onto the porch.

He saw the struggling woman, a man's hand over her mouth as he dragged her into the alley.

Allen vaulted the porch rail. The attacker let go of the woman. Before he could flee Allen hit him with 165 pounds of weight behind the fist. The attacker slammed against the brick wall of the adjoining house, then went down and lay still.

Allen turned. He recognized the girl despite her bruised and



swelling cheek, the discoloring eye. She lived a few doors away.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "I mean, can you make it home?"

"Yes, I—I think so." She pulled up her blouse, torn at the shoulder.

"I'll keep an eye on him." Ed Allen nodded toward the motionless attacker. "You go home and phone for the police."

She took a step, then turned.

"I—I don't know how to thank you. If . . . if you hadn't come out—"

"That's all right. Get the

police," he said curtly. He didn't want her to say more. He knew too well what would have happened. That's why he had moved to this area.

The girl ran uncertainly for her home. Her trembling hand was still trying to get the key in the lock when her mother peered through the curtain and opened the door.

"Rita, what on earth—"

"A man tried to attack me . . . Our new neighbor heard me scream and . . . I've got to call the police . . ."

She fumbled with the dial. Her mother pushed her away and made the call.

"Yes," her mother said finally into the phone. "The trouble is in the alley, the seven hundred block. The two men are in the alley now."

Rita stared with a hand to her disfigured face.

"Mother, you didn't tell them what the trouble was. I mean—"

"And you're not going to, either."

"But, Mother—"

"Listen to me, don't you realize what will happen? I've read and heard about it too much, and you're not going to be a fool and let yourself in for that."

"For what? What would I be in for?"

"Just be sure you understand . . .

and say the right things when the police come."

"Of course, I'll tell them exactly what—"

"No, you won't! Now listen to me. I'll tell you what happens to victims of rape—"

"Mother, he didn't—"

"—or attempted rape," her mother went right on. "In court the man's lawyer will try to prove that *you're* to blame. That *you're* a prostitute, that you enticed him—"

"Mother, I've never done any such—"

"Oh, no?" her mother said sharply. "Anything you say will be twisted. And what do you think the lawyer will imply when he brings out that you've been trying to attract the attention of our new neighbor? Such as going out in the backyard in a bikini on a chilly morning when he . . ." Rita's mother would take no interruption. "You, not the raper or would-be raper, will be on trial. Now you listen to me . . ."

LATER, at police headquarters, Ed Allen was allowed to see his lawyer, Jack McCauley.

"Jack, I'm in a mess."

McCauley nodded. "First, tell me what happened."

Allen told about hearing the scream, then dashing outside.

"Everything was going routinely. The suspect was just

regaining consciousness when the police arrived. He wouldn't admit anything. The police went to the girl's home to get her statement, and when they came back . . ."

"It became unroutine, a mess," McCauley surmised.

"A lousy mess," Ed Allen said bitterly. "She denied attempted rape . . . said she saw two men, me and the other guy, fighting in the alley. She screamed when the fight came near her . . . tried to get away, tripped, fell, struck her face, ripped her blouse."

McCauley took a deep breath. "Do you know her?"

"Just a nodding acquaintance. She lived a couple of doors down with her mother. She's been trying to get my attention, but aside from not being ready for anything like that, so recently a widower . . ."

McCauley nodded. "So you sent her home to call the police, and she changed her story, probably with Momma's help. I know it's wrong, but I can't exactly blame them. I've seen what happens to victims of rape in court. So the police came back with her new story. Then what?"

"Plenty. The suspect surmised, or maybe he knows from past experience, he's got a record of rape and child molesting. Anyway, he's aware there

isn't going to be a charge from the girl. So now he claims he was taking a shortcut home by cutting through the alley and I charged out of the house and assaulted him."

McCauley frowned. "Do the police know how you became a widower?"

"Not yet. But I suppose they will."

"Or the guy's lawyer will dig it up," said McCauley. "I can picture him bringing out in court that your wife died in circumstances similar to tonight because no one wished to become involved like you did."

Allen closed his eyes. "So it will look like I was seeking vengeance, jumped this guy for no good reason except that he was in the alley."

"I'm afraid so," McCauley agreed. "Ed, don't have anything more to say right now. I'm going to see the girl and her mother."

He was back in an hour.

"I tried to convince them they're letting a criminal run loose. No go. There's an outside chance I could break the girl down on the witness stand, but if I failed . . ."

"That would leave me supposedly guilty of assault on the guy."

"Ed," McCauley cut in. "I took it upon myself to see him. Skipping all the play and coun-

terplay . . . I finally got him to say he'd accept an out-of-court settlement. No charge against you."

"Swell!" Allen said bitterly. "I'm the innocent bystander, the loser no matter how it goes! That's justice?"

"I know." McCauley sighed. "But if you want to try it the other way, of course I'll do my damndest for you in court."

Ed Allen could see it in his mind. How many stories had he written and sold with courtroom sequences? The sneering lawyer if the girl tried to tell the truth. He, Ed Allen, under cross-examination. The twisting knife gouging open slowly healing wounds about the death of his wife. The smug "innocence" of the attempted rapist.

He finally shook his head.

"I hope that little cat down the street knows what she's done. All right, pay the guy off."

McCauley left.

About two weeks later Rita was coming home from work at just past nine in the evening. She could see Ed Allen working at his desk. He wouldn't even nod to her and her mother anymore. Maybe eventually he would understand and then maybe, he and she . . .

She screamed as the dark figure reached out of the alley for her.

Ed Allen heard the scream pierce the night. He shot to his feet, then sat down to his desk again.

Probably just some cat . . .



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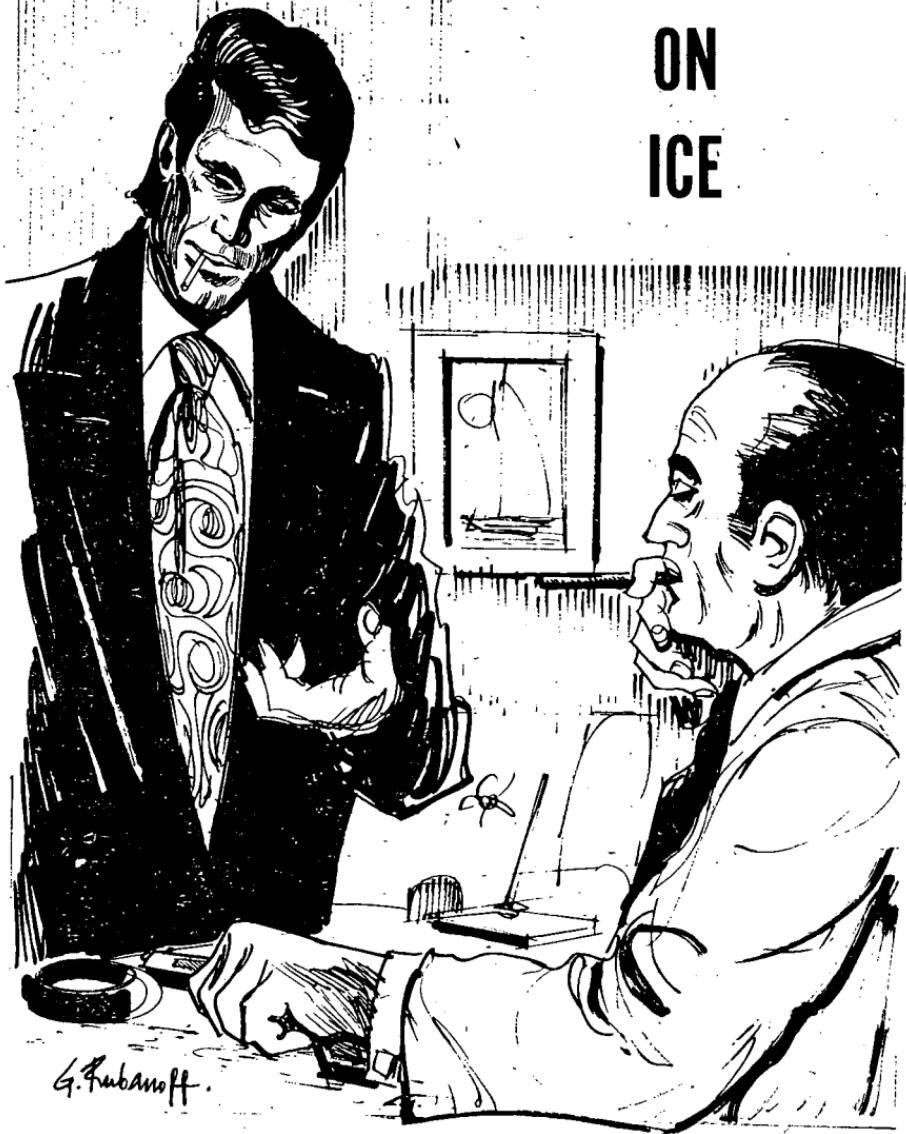
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MAY—1975

MURDER ON ICE



A NEW JUD BANNING SHORT NOVEL

Rainy it may have been, but that didn't keep the celebrants of old Saint Pat's Day out of the bar. They came in droves to drink and sing at Rudy's lounge. To sing and drink, and in at least one case to add a little spice — Rudy's funeral.

by Peter Germano

THE CALL CAME around ten in the morning. The man who phoned was no friend of mine, but he sounded urgent and he said just enough to intrigue me. So I got into my battered MG, drove down to Wilshire Boulevard and parked it on a side street, a block away from Barney's Castle, and walked the rest of the way in.

It was one of those cloudy March days in Southern California, raw, with a threat of rain. For many it was just another day in the endless round of toil and play in Los Angeles, but for the Irish population—and for many who were not Irish—it was St. Patrick's Day.

A day for the wearing of the green, the singing of Irish songs and the imbibing of good

Irish whiskey. And the mecca for this celebration was Barney's Castle, a restaurant housed within an edifice of black stone and false towers...a bit of old Erin wedged in an area of modern, high rise office buildings.

A long line of men and women had already formed in front of the restaurant when I came up Western, ducking my head against the wind; hawkers in front of the bistro were selling banners, buttons, green ties, everything. I walked past them into the parking lot and went directly to the side door. A security guard, hired for the day, blocked by entrance.

"It's all right," I said amiably. "I'm a regular here."

The guard eyed me without moving. I was starting to get

impatient when a woman's voice from inside said: "Let him in, Joe."

I walked inside.

Kathy O'Connor, a motherly looking waitress in kelly green uniform gave me a disapproving look. Kathy was an old timer at the Castle.

"Where's your green tie?" she asked.

"At the cleaners, getting last year's celebration stains out."

I went past her, around the piano bar and into the larger dining area. The place was already crowded and from the off-key singing going on I figured some of the customers must have come in already loaded.

I was maneuvering around a crowded booth when Frenchy, carrying a loaded tray, came by. He gave me a sardonic look.

"Well, well. . .if it ain't Sam Spade himself. . ."

I let it pass. It's an old joke with Frenchy. He gets home so late every night all he watches is old movies. Hell, I happen to like my old trenchcoat, and wearing a hat in Los Angeles is my way of saying to hell with custom.

I walked up to the bar and waited until Gene Koslow, the bartender, had a moment's break.

"Same as always, Gene," I said.

I turned to size up the crowd pushing in through the front door. Inside there was a din of talk, laughter, snatches of Irish song. It was a wild morning and I knew it would get progressively wilder.

"Rudy in his office?"

Gene nodded as he set my drink on the counter. "Came in early this morning. Early for Rudy, anyway."

I reached in my pocket for money, but Gene waved me off. "This one's on Saint Pat," he said.

I finished my drink before wending my way through the crowded booths to the back of the room. A long hallway ran past the kitchen to a back door delivery area. The other end of the badly lighted passageway ended at a closed door.

A waiter was scooping ice cubes up from a long, waist-high bin near the kitchen side of the hallway. He turned and hurried past me as I stepped inside the passageway.

He wasn't one of the regulars, just someone hired for the day. I turned toward the closed door. The sound of merriment was muted here. In fact, it was quiet enough for me to hear the ice cubes tinkle down into the closed bin from the big ice making machine.

I walked past it to the closed door and rapped my knuckles

twice on the dark wood panel.

Rudy's voice, from inside, sounded tense. "Who is it?"

"Banning," I said.

Rudy's voice eased a bit. "Come on in."

I opened the door and went inside and looked across the small office to the big man behind the walnut desk. Larry Rudy looked soft, rumpled and tired in his white palm beach suit which he wore winter and summer. His voice was soft, too, but his eyes were hard, clear and cold.

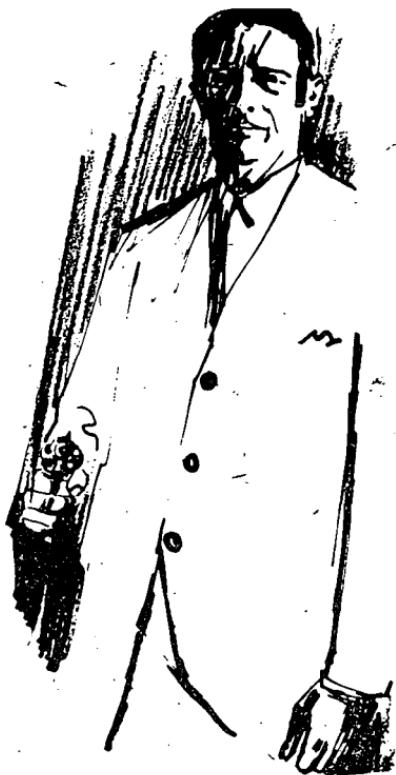
The office had no windows. A light burned on his desk. There was a floor lamp by a leather couch in a corner of the office. A ceiling exhaust fan whirred quietly, moving the air in the room.

"Shut the door!" Rudy snapped.

He had his hand covering something on his desk. As I kicked the door shut he slid his palm back and I saw the small .22 caliber automatic. Rudy dropped the gun into a desk drawer, closed it.

"Sit down."

I stood with my hands in my trenchcoat pockets, eyeing him. Every time I see Rudy I get the same quick mental picture... Sidney Greenstreet in rumpled white suit behind a desk, eyeing Humphrey Bogart through lidded eyes...



I said casually: "You wanted to see me?"

"I've got a job for you," he said.

I remained standing. "I've got a job."

"For Christ's sakes!" Rudy exploded. "Sit down! And take that goddam hat off!"

I shrugged, dropped my hat on a small table by the couch, lighted a cigaret and waited.

"You still have your private investigator's license?"

I gave him a look. "Why?" Rudy leaned back in his chair. "Someone's out to kill me. Right here. Today!"

I smiled sourly, picked up my hat, started for the door.

Rudy sat up straight. "Hey, where in hell you going?"

"Back to work," I said.

I ground out my cigaret in the ash tray by the door. "You want publicity, tell it to the NBC crew you got coming in here this afternoon—"

"Oh, shut up and listen!" Rudy said rudely. He pulled open a drawer, tossed a folded piece of paper on the desk.

"If I wanted a flack, I wouldn't have called you." He moistened his lips. "Take a look at this."

I studied the fat man behind the desk. There was fear in Rudy's lidded eyes that wasn't faked. I shrugged, walked to the desk, picked up the paper.

The message was printed in block letters on cheap ruled paper and a child could have printed it: *YOU'LL BE DEAD BEFORE THE DAY IS OUT.*

It wasn't signed. I tossed the note back on Rudy's desk.

"Probably just a St. Patrick's Day gag," I said.

"It isn't a joke!" Rudy snapped. I saw beads of cold sweat on his upper lip. "There've been other things..." He reached for his wallet, tos-

sed five century notes in front of me.

"That for now—five more later."

I frowned. "What for?"

"My life!" Rudy leaned back in his chair, mopped his face with a white linen handkerchief. "Take it."

I shook my head. "Hell," I said, "any insurance company on the Boulevard will give you better odds for less money." He started to say something, but I cut him off. "Sure, I've still got my license. I wasn't very good at it, but it was a living. I had a wife, too...until you stepped into my life." My voice hardened. "Now I'm a bachelor again, selling used cars in the Valley."

Rudy waved that away impatiently. "I haven't got time to listen to the sad memoirs of Jud Banning," he said. He leaned forward, shook a finger at me. "Dammit, I'm offering you more money for a day's work than you ever made in your life!"

I gave him a slow level look and turned to the door. "I'll sing a chorus of 'Irish Eyes Are Smiling' for you before I leave," I said.

"Wait a minute!" he snarled. "They'll kill me first! Then...maybe Lola."

I had my hand on the door knob; I turned slowly to look

back to him. He had me where it still hurt. Lola—my ex-wife.

"Take the job," Rudy said.

I didn't move.

"What about Lola?" I asked.

Rudy leaned back. He knew he had me now. A smile formed around his shark's mouth.

"She's been threatened, too." He glanced toward the door. "Lola's due in at three, like always. We'll both be here until closing. And you know how it is out there. It's a madhouse—"

"Call the cops," I said. "It's their job."

"No." Rudy got up and went to his small liquor cabinet from which he took a bottle of Chivas Regal. . .he poured himself a drink over ice cubes from his private silver ice bucket.

"You know how the L.A. police work," he said. "Threats they get all the time." He turned to me. "Find out who wants to kill me. That's all I want."

"Why me?" I was really puzzled. I waved to the money on his desk. "For that kind of retainer you can hire any of the top agencies in town."

Rudy sipped at his drink. "I'm not sure. Maybe because in a peculiar way you're honest."

He gestured toward the muted sounds of merriment beyond the office door. "Listen to them," he said. "I've got a

thousand friends out there. . . His lips twisted in thin smile. "I don't trust any of them."

"You don't trust me, either," I said.

Larry Rudy shrugged, walked back to his desk. "All right. . .let's say I need you. I don't want the police department digging into my personal life."

He settled down in the padded chair behind his desk. "Someone wants to kill me. Today. In my own restaurant." He shrugged. "Whoever he is, he couldn't have picked a better day. Customers packed in like sardines and it's not noon yet. It'll be like that until we close. . .most of them drunk, whooping it up, singing dirty Irish songs, telling Irish jokes—"

I interrupted him. "And you want me to keep you alive until tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Just until tomorrow."

I walked to the desk, picked up the money.

Rudy said: "You got a gun?" "Never use it," I said.

Rudy shook his head. "You look like a fugitive from the I.R.A., dammit. Leave your coat and hat in here. I don't want you frightening the customers away."

I shrugged. If that's the way he wanted it.

I left my hat and coat on his couch and went out.

II

I STOPPED in the passageway outside Larry Rudy's office to light a cigaret. Rudy was afraid all right...under that rumpled white suit he was a mess of jelly. And Rudy didn't scare easily.

Sure, I knew there were a lot of people who would like to see Rudy dead. I was one of them. I guess I've never gotten over his marrying my ex-wife, Lola.

I snapped my lighter shut and was starting to walk toward the dining room when someone loomed up in front of me.

He stopped, said quickly: "Oh, sorry..."

I eyed him. He was a short, slight man with thinning brown hair, big round eyes and a round, boyish face although he was at least thirty-five. He flashed me a quick hesitant smile.

"I didn't see you," he added.

"Looking for someone?"

"The john...?"

I pointed. "Back that way, to left of the cigaret machine." But he was eyeing Rudy's closed door and he didn't seem to hear me. I took him by the arm and swung him around. "The john—that way."

He reacted meekly enough. "Oh, yeah—thanks."

I watched him go back into the dining room. Yeah, I had seen him before. Dennis Hollister, a dentist with a downtown office and a big, redheaded wife, taller than him and built like...

Well, you know what I mean. You get to wonder sometimes how a woman like that gets herself tied up with a quiet little guy like Hollister. Mother image, probably. But I knew he hadn't come in here looking for the john. Dennis Hollister had been in Barney Castle before.

I was about to follow him into the dining room when Frenchy came hurrying in, an ice bucket in his hand. He shot me a look.

"You still here?"

"All day," I said airily.

"The cross of Lorraine," Frenchy muttered. He flipped the ice bin lid open, waited as the ice maker spewed cubes into the big chest container.

"Man against machine," Frenchy muttered. He turned to me. "Even money we run out of ice cubes before closing time?"

I nodded. "I'll go with the ice maker: five bucks worth."

I walked off as Frenchy dipped into the chest.

It was pandemonium inside the dining room. Booths which

ordinarily seated four now held six, eight, in some instances ten people. Everyone sported something green. There was a lot of good-natured bantering, some off key singing—everyone appeared to be having a good time.

At the piano bar Hoagy McAllister, white-haired and baggy-eyed, a piano player from another era, was fingering the keys—he'd been playing in Barney Castle a long time.

Men and women were grouped five deep around him, singing. The place was jumping, but it seemed like harmless fun. I threaded my way back to the small bar near the entrance.

Gene was squirting gin into a martini glass. He flipped me a look.

"Find Rudy?"

"Yeah." I turned and eyed the crowd.

Hollister was seated across from his wife in one of the smaller booths. The big redhead looked uncomfortable. I caught snatches of conversation above the general noise.

"You see Rudy?" she asked him.

"No," Hollister replied. He had a martini in front of him... most of the food in his plate was untouched. He drained his drink, looked around for a waiter.

His wife said: "For Chris-sakes, Dennis, eat something!"

Hollister ignored her. He collared Kathy as she came along, ordered another round.

His wife said: "No, not for me."

"Make mine a double," Hollister said.

Dee Hollister waited until Kathy left, then she started to get up. "If you want to make a drunken fool of yourself," she said bitterly, "go ahead. I'm going home."

Hollister reached across the table, grabbed her wrist. "Not until I see Rudy."

She jerked her hand away. "I told you—there's nothing between us!"

Hollister's lips twisted. "Nothing?"

She pressed back against the booth padding. A flicker of fear showed in her eyes.

"An abortion," Hollister said, lowering his voice. "Last month. Riverside Hospital."

Dee wet her lips. "I told you—a D & C, that's all!"

Hollister's voice cut across hers, bitter, hard; "An abortion!"

He looked up as Kathy brought him his double martini. He waited until she left.

Dee's voice was muted: "I want to go home."

"A big fat man," Hollister said bitterly. "Why, Dee?"

His wife stood up, clutching up her purse and coat. He reached out for her, but she evaded him this time, pushed her way toward the front door. Hollister settled back for a moment, then he gulped his martini, tossed money on the table and followed his wife.

I watched them both leave.

III

AT THREE-O-FIVE I was standing by the cigaret vending machine where I could keep an eye on the crowd and spot anyone trying to slip into the back hallway. Lola was due in at three, but she was invariably late.

McAllister had been playing all the old Irish favorites since eleven. The NBC crew had come in, set up lights and camera, taken their shots and blurred interviews—an annual event—had their quota of free drinks and left.

I watched Hoagy McAllister reach for the drink which Kathy kept fresh on the piano for him. One of the customers, a man who probably should have been back at his office an hour ago, asked thickly: "Hey, Hoagy—where's Lola?"

The others around the piano bar took up the chant: "We want Lola...We want Lola..."

Then she came in, slipping through the side entrance. I

saw her before most of the others. She still hit me where it hurts most. My ex-wife...a beautiful woman, hard, ambitious and dissatisfied. She was wearing a low cut green entertainer's gown under her coat which seemed to cling to her slim figure. Lola was thirty-five, but the years had been kind to her.

Cheers went up as she was spotted. She slipped out of her mink coat, held it out to Kathy, and pushed her way to Hoagy's side. I saw her whisper something to him and he nodded.

Then she turned, held out her arms. Two men eagerly hoisted her up on the piano bar. McAllister handed her a microphone. She shook her head to shouted song requests, nodded to McAllister.

Then she started to sing: "Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets..." as McAllister accompanied her. She sang it with just the right touch of petulance and abandon, the amplifiers reaching everyone in the now quiet restaurant.

When she finished men and women stamped their feet, clapped, whistled. Lola bowed slightly, smiled.

"Someone once told me the devil was an Irishman," she said. She held up a hand, stilling the voices around her. "But I never knew an Irishman

who wasn't a saint...on Saint Pat's Day, that is..."

There was a round of general, good-humored laughter at this. Then: "And now, what shall it be? 'Irish Eyes Are Smiling'?"

There was a roar of approval.

I saw her hesitate, her gaze swinging out across the room toward Rudy's office. Her eyes met mine and I saw surprise flash in them. Then she looked away, started to sing.

I crossed over to Gene and he set a drink up for me. He looked across to Lola. "She's pretty good today, eh?"

"Yeah," I answered stiffly, and moved away.

A loud voice turned my attention to a booth occupied by two couples. They faced each other across a table littered with empty glasses. The four of them were in their forties, the women maybe a few years younger and looking better than their husbands.

The bigger of the two men, still powerful but paunchy now, was pounding his fist on the table. He had a voice like he was using a megaphone.

"Hey, waiter! What kind of lousy service—?"

The woman sitting next to him put her hand across his mouth. "You're making a fool of yourself, Arthur!"



He shoved her hand away. She looked across the table to the other man. "Can't you get him to shut up, Nick?"

Nick's wife (I assumed she was his wife) giggled. She was a small, nicely-shaped woman with touched-up, honey brown hair...she was also two sheets to the wind and enjoying herself.

"I want another drink," she said.

Arthur glared at his wife. "See?" He pounded on the table again. "Garson!"

He lunged up into the aisle and grabbed Frenchy as the waiter came hurrying by.

"Dammit, Garson—wait a minute!"

Frenchy eyed him. "Oui, Monsieur?"

The big man waved an oak beam arm. "My friends are get-ting dry."

Frenchy eyed the empty glass-es. "What are your friends drinking, Monsieur?"

"Good ole Jim Beam on the rocks," the man said. "Just keep 'em coming. I'll tell you when to stop."

He settled back into the booth as Frenchy hurried off. "You gotta show these waiters who's boss, eh?" He turned to his wife. "Howdy a like my French?"

"I'm still trying to get around you calling me friend." She turned to the woman across the table. "Twenty years we've been married, Penny, and it's come to this—"

"Aw, Sally, you know what I mean," the big man cut in. He turned to Nick. "Bastard owns this place...he must be around somewhere..."

He started to get up again. His wife grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

His companion said: "Jesus, Art...the place is jammed. You'll get lost."

This stopped the big man. "Yeah," he said, frowning. Then, brightening: "I'll ask somebody..."

He lunged to his feet, started toward the back...I came up then, blocking his way and he grabbed me, threw an arm

across my shoulders like old pals.

"Hey, buddy," he said. "You know the owner of this joint?"

I nodded.

"Big fat slob name of Larry Rudy?"

I smiled. "That's him."

The big man put his mouth close to my ear in whispered confidence. "Where is he, ole buddy?"

You could start a flame with his breath. I said: "You a friend of Rudy's?"

"Yeah," the big man said. "Art Rodell, that's me. Haven't seen Rudy in more than seventeen years."

"I'll tell him you're here," I said.

I started to walk away, but Rodell dragged me back. "Just show me, ole buddy. I want to see the sonuvabitch alone!"

I shook him off. "Easy, feller—"

Nick came up, pulled Rodell away from me. "Sorry," he apologized. "Guess my friend's had just a little too much to drink."

"He's not alone," I answered. "Look, if you're friends of Larry Rudy's, he should be coming out of his office in a few minutes."

"Sure, sure," Nick said quickly. "No hurry."

He dragged Rodell back to his booth. I walked over to the cigaret machine and waited.

"What are you trying to do?" Nick was saying. "Get us thrown out of here?"

The women looked uncomfortable.

Rödell made a fist. "All I want is five minutes with him, Nick!"

Sally sighed. "I've been hearing that every year since he came home from Korea."

Penny turned to her husband who was scowling. "Me, too. One of the highlights of coming to California—to see someone named Larry Rudy." She giggled. "Jeez, he must have horns or something!"

Sally looked at Nick. "Who is he, anyhow? Arthur won't tell me."

Nick kept his mouth shut.

"Aw, come on," his wife said. "Tell us."

Nick's voice reached me, flat and cold: "Biggest bastard in the Fifth Marines!"

Then he caught me looking and lowered his voice. I moved away again, stopping by Gene's bar. Frenchy was just leaving with a trayful of drinks. Kathy came up behind him with an order for Gene.

I indicated the booth with a nod of my head. "Who're the characters in the far booth?"

Gene looked up. "Never saw them in here before."

Kathy turned. "Them?" She shrugged. "Heard them talking

when they first came in. From Indiana or Illinois, some place like that—"

"Tourists?"

Kathy nodded. "The women were complaining about not seeing the sun. They're staying at some motel in Hollywood...the Sea Shell, I think. I told them if they wanted to get a burn this time of the year they should go to Palm Springs."

She picked up her loaded tray. "Some folks believe everything they read about Los Angeles, I guess..."

I turned to Gene as she moved off. "Rudy mention anything about out-of-town friends coming in today?"

"Not to me," Gene said. He dipped under the bar for ice. "Christ," he growled, "empty again."

He put the ice bucket on the counter. "Do me a favor, Jud?"

I grinned. "Cost you a drink." I took the bucket and headed for the ice bin in back.

The back passageway was empty. I flipped the chest lid open. It was cavernous inside, and although the ice maker was working steadily feeding ice cubes into the big container, it was losing ground. I had to lean way over to scoop ice up from inside.

I filled the bucket, lowered the lid, then paused, my nose catching a faint, but unmistak-

able scent. Chanel Number Five.

I set the bucket down, turned to look at Rudy's closed door. Somebody had slipped by me. It wasn't a man...but then, killers come in two sexes...or maybe it's three...

Something crashed inside Rudy's office. I snatched up a short length of water pipe lying near the bin and ran to the door.

Larry Rudy was behind his desk, disentangling himself from a woman he had pulled down on his lap. His desk lamp was on the floor.

I said uncomfortably: "Happy Saint Pat's Day, Mrs. Callahan."

The woman, tall, willowy, beautiful, glared at me as she stood up. Rudy started to wipe lipstick from his mouth.

"It's all right, Jud," he said irritably.

Lila Callahan looked at him. "What's all right?" Then she swung around to me. "What are you doing with that pipe?"

I shrugged: "I didn't see you come in, Mrs. Callahan." I dropped the pipe on a chair. "There's somebody out there wants to see you," I told Rudy. "A big guy from out of town...Indiana, I think. He says he's a friend of yours."

"I don't have any out of town friends," Rudy snapped.

Mrs. Callahan stamped her foot petulantly. "Rudy, I asked you! What is he doing, breaking in here like that?"

"Keeping an eye on me," Rudy answered. He walked to the liquor cabinet, mixed a couple of drinks. "I hired him this morning." He walked back to Mrs. Callahan. "Someone's threatened to kill me."

Mrs. Callahan laughed. "You're kidding."

Rudy's voice was cold. "I never kid about my life." He turned, waved me off. "I'm busy, Banning."

I knew when I wasn't needed. But I couldn't resist a parting remark.

"How's Charley, Mrs. Callahan?"

She stiffened.

Rudy eyed me with cold displeasure. "Remember," he said, "discretion is the hallmark of a good employee."

"Yes," I answered. "Only until tomorrow." I nodded to the woman. "Good day, Mrs. Callahan."

She gave me a dirty look as I went out.

IV

AT TEN O'CLOCK I went outside for a smoke. The lines in front of the restaurant were gone. So were the hawkers and vendors. A drizzle made haloes around

the street lights. It had been a long day.

I finished the cigaret and went back inside. The dining room was still crowded, the talk bawdier now, the singing blurred.

Lola was taking a breather...she was talking to someone at the piano bar and I started to go to her. I wanted to ask her about the threats Rudy said she had received...

Someone snapped his fingers at me as I went by a small booth. "Waiter!" The voice sounded insolent. "Over here, waiter!"

I knew who it was before I turned. Bill Jennings was a solid, good-looking man with long sideburns and modishly cut shaggy hair.

He reacted with phony surprise. "Oh, it's the poor man's Sam Spade. Sorry, I took you for—"

I cut him off. "When did you sneak in?"

He laughed, but it had an edge to it. "Now is that a nice thing to say to a member of the D.A.'s office?"

"Former member," I reminded him. "How much did it cost you to keep out of jail?"

Jennings leaned back, his eyes narrowing. "My, my, Jud, your teeth are showing." He turned to the woman in the booth with him. "Madge, meet

the dumbest private eye in Hollywood, Jud Banning."

I looked her over. Madge was a ripe tomato, a bit overblown and as false as her blonde wig and padded bra. She looked up at me, her smile uncertain.

"Pleased to meetcha, Jud."

I nodded to her.

Jennings said: "Rudy in his office?"

"He is," I said. "But he isn't seeing anybody."

Jennings got to his feet. "He'll see me." Then, motioning to the girl with him: "Oh, take care of Madge for me, will you?" His voice had a sneer in it. "You should get along just fine together."

I clamped a hand on his shoulder as he started to leave. "What do you want to see Rudy for?"

"That's between Rudy and me," he said coldly. Then: "For Chrissakes, Jud, quit playing detective. I'm not going to kill Rudy, just talk to him."

He gestured to Madge. "Be a good sport and keep an eye on her. In this madhouse I don't trust her, or anybody." He grinned. "Except you, of course."

He swaggered off down the aisle toward the back of the dining room. I took a step after him, then stopped. Jennings was crooked, but he wasn't a fool.

Madge said: "Please join me, Mr. Banning." She batted her eyes slightly as I turned to her. "I don't like being left alone."

I slid into the seat vacated by Jennings. Madge picked up her menu. "I'm hungry." She scanned it briefly. "How's the food here?"

"Best in the city," I said.

"You eat here often?"

I shrugged. I looked toward the piano bar, but Lola had gone off somewhere.

"Order the prime rib," I said. "You won't be disappointed—unless you're a vegetarian."

But Jennings still bothered me. I started to get up and go after him. A couple of men, deep in their cups, staggered by. They stopped, gazed in drunken wonder at Madge's cleavage. One of them leaned over the table toward her.

"Hey, Gorgeous...wanna hear a Pat and Mike story?"

I pulled the man away from the table. "Easy, feller," I said. "Her husband's a wrestler."

"Ain't you her husband?"

I shook my head. "Just keeping his girl warm for him."

The two men regarded me with owlish confusion. Finally the second man said: "Oh, I getcha..."

They staggered off.

I sat down again. Madge was the kind of girl that would attract flies.

"Crazy, ain't it?" she said. "I mean...this place. Is it always like this?"

"Only once a year, on St. Patrick's Day."

Madge frowned, puckering her heavy eye shadow. "Oh, yeah, I remember. That's why Bill told me to wear green." She looked at me, eyes wide open. "You Irish?"

"Everybody is today," I said. I was still worrying about Jennings.

I spotted Kathy and called her over. "Miss..." I paused and looked questioningly at Madge.

"Oh," Madge said, catching on. "It's Madge Kellerman...and it is Miss."

"Kathy," I said. "Miss Kellerman wants something to eat."

Madge said happily, on the heels of this opener: "I'll have spaghetti and meat balls."

Kathy stared, her pencil poised over her order pad at the ready.

I choked. "Spaghetti—on St. Patrick's Day?"

She looked at me in wide-eyed wonder. "Gee, don't the Irish make meatballs?"

Kathy said with no inflection in her voice: "Spaghetti and meat balls, coming up."

She gave me a look, walked off toward the kitchen. I settled back, giving up.

"Why did Bill call you Sam Spade?"

"His private joke," I said.

Madge picked up her glass...she was drinking a Pink Lady. "Well, here's mud in your eye." An uncertain look flickered in her eyes. "Irish mud...?"

Jennings came back a few minutes later. He looked sullen.

"Get your coat," he said to Madge. "We're getting out of here."

Madge looked startled. "I haven't had my spaghetti—"

"We'll eat somewhere else!" Jennings snarled. "Get your coat!"

Madge got up. I said: "You see Rudy?"

He shot me a mean look as he hurried Madge out. I sat back and watched them, then I got up and went back to Rudy's office. I started to knock, then thought: *To hell with it*, and went inside.

Rudy was on the phone, talking to someone. I could see him sweating. "I'll have it tonight," he said. "Tonight for sure..." He cut off as he saw me, put a hand over the mouthpiece and glared.

"What the hell you want?" he snarled at me.

I shrugged. "Just checking," I said. "Just checking..." I went out, closing the door behind me.



I leaned against the ice machine and thought things over. What in hell was I doing here? I didn't even like the man. I wasn't alone. But killing Rudy? I shrugged. The whole thing was probably just a bad joke.

Just a couple of more hours, I told myself. Then I'd collect the rest of my fee and go home.

I walked back into the dining room. The crowd was thinning. A few people were still grouped around the piano bar. Lola was nowhere in sight.

I decided to keep an eye on the tourists from Indiana. Frenchy walked past their booth and glanced at the empty glasses. He was dog-tired—I

knew he was hoping they'd go home.

Art Rodell waved to him: "Another round, Garson!"

Nick shook his head wearily. "No, just bring the tab." Frenchy heaved a sigh of relief and hurried off. Rodell looked at Nick. "Oughta stick that bastard Rudy with the bill," he said angrily.

"I want to go home," his wife said dolefully.

He eyed her unsympathetically. Sally's eyes were half closed, her complexion yellowish.

"Jeez," Rodell said with typical tactlessness, "you remind me of one of them Korean gooks—"

Sally bolted upright. "Gook?"

"Nick," Rodell appealed to his companion, "don't she look like one of them mamasans—?"

"Don't drag me into this," Nick said.

"I hate California!" Sally said bitterly. She turned to her husband. "You heard me. I want to go home!"

But Rodell was looking toward the back of the room. I saw him reach out and grab Nick's arm. "Nick!" he hissed. "That's him!"

I looked. Rudy had come out of his office and was walking toward the piano bar. I turned back to the booth. "Sonuvabitch hasn't changed at all!" the big

man was saying. He shoved his wife back as she tried to hold him. "I came a long way to see him—"

I figured it was time to earn my fee.

Rudy had stopped beside McAllister. Rodell beat me to him. The big man clamped a hand on Rudy's shoulder, jerked him around. He shoved his face close to Rudy's startled one.

"Remember me, Gunny?" he snarled.

Rudy tried to push him away. "You're drunk, mister—"

Rodell's voice was a roar. "Sure, I'm drunk. But I remember you, Larry Rudy, you dirty old—"

I caught up to him then, spun him around. "Easy, feller," I said.

Rodell shoved me aside. "Stay out of this, buddy!" He made a lunge for Rudy and I got between them. The big man started to throw a roundhouse punch at me. I jammed the heel of my right hand under his chin and sent him staggering back.

Nick came running up and clamped his arms around Rodell. The two women trailing him looked frightened and embarrassed.

Rudy dabbed at his face with his handkerchief. "Get that drunk out of here!"

"Sure," Nick said. He pulled Rodell back, hissed in the big man's ear. "You crazy fool! You'll get us locked up, that's what you'll do."

Sally wailed: "How will it look in the papers back home—the Rodells vacationing in Los Angeles—*behind bars!*"

This quieted Rodell. He let himself be dragged out by Nick and his wife.

I turned back to Rudy. "Those are the people I told you about...your friends from Indiana—"

"Never saw the jerk in my life!" Rudy said harshly. But he was lying. I knew it and he knew it.

He turned to Hoagy McAllister who was puffing on a cigaret. "Where's Lola?"

"Gone to powder her nose," the piano-player said.

Rudy stepped up to the mike and nodded to McAllister who beat out a fanfare on the keys. He waited until the noise in the room quieted down, then held up a hand for attention.

"Don't mind the little disturbance we just had," he said smoothly. "No harm done. Just some drunk cutting up." He paused for effect, then: "We've been giving old Saint Pat a hell of a welcome, eh?" There was a roar of approval from the crowd. "But it's getting late. From now on the drinks are on

the house...long as the liquor lasts."

There was another roar from the crowd. Rudy held up his hand again.

"Lola will be back to wind it up. Keep it clean. No more dirty shanty Irish songs. Remember, there are ladies present."

There was a round of general laughter as he walked off. I intercepted him.

"Jennings was here," I said.

"I saw him."

"You have a lot of friends," I said drily. "The wrong kind."

He gave me a look. "I'm not paying you to be a critic," he sneered. He started to walk away, looked back. "We're closing at one tonight. Come to my office—I'll pay you off then."

V

IT WAS NEARLY closing time. I ducked into the men's room, found a drunk locked up in a stall, got him outside and called a cab. I waited outside until the cab pulled up, listening to the drunk's complaints, and helped him inside.

"Take him home," I told the cabby.

"Where?"

I shrugged. "Just roll," I said. "It'll come to him."

I went back inside the restaurant. Hoagy McAllister was

having himself another smoke. One thing about McAllister, he'd just as soon stay here as go back to his apartment. His wife had died some years back; he lived alone.

I said: "Where's Lola?"

"Gone home," he answered. He finished his drink. "Christ, what a day!"

"Yeah." I looked around. The place was quiet now. Only a few customers were left and they were talking in low tones. A half hour more and I could pick up the other half of my grand and go home.

I started toward Gene's bar. Two people came in then. The girl was young, beautiful, and if she told you she was nineteen she'd probably be lying. I had seen her around before—Leslie Marsh. I knew her mother. The young man with her I didn't know.

They were arguing.

"I said I was sorry," the man muttered.

"You're not sorry at all!" Leslie said. She was burning.

"All right!" he snapped. "I'm not sorry. He's old enough to be your father, that's all!"

She stopped by the bar, her eyes blazing. "Tony Limo, you've got a dirty mind!"

Limo sneered. "Sure I have! When a guy like Rudy offers to pay for a girl's tuition at USC, no strings attached—"

"I told you," she cut him off angrily, "He was a friend of mother's!"

"I'll bet," Limo sneered.

She slapped his face. He took it, glancing at me as I moved toward them. But he didn't say anything.

Leslie turned to Gene. "I want to see Mr. Rudy."

Gene shrugged, looked at me. "We're about to close—"

"I know," Leslie said hurriedly. "But Larry—Mr. Rudy . . . is expecting me."

She hurried off before I could say anything. I looked after her. Hell, what harm could she do?

Limo swung around to Gene. "A double bourbon."

Gene eyed him. "Water or soda?"

"Make it easy on yourself," Limo said. He was an unpleasant sort of man. He turned on his elbow and stared angrily toward the back of the dining room.

I had a last drink. I didn't like Limo's looks, but he wasn't my responsibility.

After a while Limo glanced at his wrist watch. "If she's not back inside of two minutes," he said to no one in particular, "I'm going after her."

I said, "You're not a very trusting fellow—"

Limo glared at me.

Gene reached under the counter, placed his empty ice bucket on the bar. "One more time, Jud," he said. "This one oughta do it for the day."

I took the bucket and started to go toward the back. Then I saw Leslie Marsh hurrying toward us, her face pale, eyes wide, shocked.

She grabbed Tony Limo by the arm. "Tony—take me home!"

Limo didn't move. "What did he do to you, Les?"

Leslie just shook her head. "Take me home!" Then, not waiting, she turned and ran blindly out of the restaurant.

Limo said thickly: "I'll kill the bastard if he did anything to Les."

He slammed a bill down on the bar, took off after the girl.

I looked at Gene. He shook his head. "Something scared her."

"Yeah," I said, frowning. "I'd better check."

I headed for Rudy's office.

The passageway was gloomy. The kitchen was quiet; the cooks and the help had long since gone home. I stopped by the ice bin, set Gene's bucket down on the closed lid.

Rudy's door was open.

I started toward it, felt my foot nudge something. I looked down. It was a woman's clutch bag, pink, beaded.

I knew whose it was before I picked it up. It wasn't Leslie's.

I looked inside Rudy's office. It was empty. The lamp on his desk was still burning. There were two glasses on the desk, Rudy's fancy ice bucket next to them. The drinks looked as though they had not been touched.

I walked to the couch where I had left my trench coat and hat and put them on. I started to shove the clutch bag into a pocket, felt my fingers touch something cold and hard. I pulled it out. A small .22 automatic.

I stared at it for a moment, then went to Rudy's desk. I knew I wouldn't find Rudy's gun there.

I was right. I was holding it in my hand.

But an airline folder in the drawer caught my attention. I picked it up. There was a ticket in it, a Mexican airline flight to Acapulco. One ticket—but the credit card carbon inside listed two tickets! I shoved the folder inside my pocket.

I thought about it, and I didn't like it. Rudy's gun was in my pocket, and my fingerprints were all over it. Maybe it was only a joke, except that Rudy was not a funny man. And he was not the kind to buy two tickets to Acapulco and leave one behind.

I picked up one of the glasses and sniffed the contents. Something nagged at the back of my mind. I looked into the ice bucket. It was empty.

Rudy was gone. But where had he gone?

I switched off the light, closed the door and walked to the back door. It was closed but not locked. I looked outside.

Rudy's blue Cadillac was parked in his private slot at the far end of the delivery area. I stared at it for a long time, then I closed the door and locked it. Rudy could have gone home with Lola, but I doubted it. It wasn't like him to leave his Caddy parked in back, and he owed me five hundred dollars.

Behind me I could hear the ice machine whirring. Cubes rattled down the chute, but their falling seemed muted. Something rattled around in my head.

I walked back to the ice bin, flipped the lid open.

Rudy stared up at me.

A small trickle of blood was congealed on the left side of his face. Even as I looked ice cubes trickled down, dropping on his face and chest.

Rudy was dead all right . . . from a bullet hole under his left ear. It was a small bullet and a small hole, but at close range a .22 does

the job as well as a .38 Magnum.

I took a deep breath. It looked like Rudy had hired the wrong man to save his life. But I had taken the job, and I felt I owed him something.

I took out my wallet and dropped the money he had paid me into the bin. The C notes fluttered down, falling across his face.

Rudy had a lot of faults. He was a chaser, a hard man with a buck, a lot of other things. But hell, he was human, too.

I couldn't keep his money, but I could try to find who had killed him. Not that it would do Rudy any good now.

I started to drop the lid when I remembered Gene was waiting for ice. I held the bucket under the chute and waited until enough cubes had fallen into it, then I closed the lid on Larry Rudy.

Rudy would keep. As they say, he was on ice. By tomorrow opening time I figured he'd be under two feet of ice cubes.

I glanced down the darkened passageway. Finding Rudy's killer wasn't going to be easy. But the way I had it figured I should have until closing time tomorrow before one of the waiters got far enough down to spot the body.

That gave me about twenty-four hours.



I went back to the bar. Gene was checking the cash register receipts. I put the ice bucket on the counter.

"Rudy's gone home," I said. "Give the customers one last round, Gene, then let's lock up."

VI

THE APARTMENT house was on a quiet street just off Sunset Boulevard. Subdued colored lights shone through shrubbery. It had a spacious entrance. It was not too expensive to live here, but it wasn't cheap, either. There were more than a hundred apartment houses like this scattered throughout Hollywood.

I parked my MG in front of the building and lighted a cigaret. Rudy could have lived in Bel Air, Truesdale or Beverly Hills—it seemed strange that he chose to live here in an ordinary apartment house. I flipped my cigaret butt out into the middle of the street and

grinned crookedly. Maybe it was because Rudy was seldom home.

I went into the building and turned down a corridor and knocked on a door.

It took a while for her to answer, but finally I heard a chain rattle, then the door opened and Lola looked out at me, sleepy eyed, still fastening a robe over her nightgown.

"Jud!" She seemed surprised.

"May I comè in?"

She brushed hair back from her face. "At this hour?" She sighed. "I'd like to say yes, but you know the kind of day I've had. I'm bushed."

I said: "I remember when your day didn't get started until after midnight."

She stiffened slightly and a small bitterness made tiny lines around her mouth.

"That was a long time ago, and not since Brooklyn..." But she stepped back from the door. "Oh, all right—come in."

I followed her into an expensively furnished living room.

"Rudy in?" I tried to be casual about it.

She looked at me with a puzzled smile. "No."

"You expecting him?"

Lola threw up her hands. "For Heavens sakes, Jud—you come to see me, or Rudy?" She plucked a cigaret from an ornate container on the coffee table. "I'm sure it's no secret that Rudy comes home when he wants to. I've given up expecting him."

I looked around. "Nice place. More than I could ever give you." I held my lighter under her cigaret. "I'm sorry to hear that about you and Rudy."

She shrugged. "I made a mistake. But I'm not crying about it."

She walked into the small kitchen overlooking the living room. It was an open area two steps up, complete with built-ins. But Lola had never been much of a cook and I doubted if she used it for anything more than a bar.

She called out: "Still drinking gin and tonics?"

"Coffee will be much better tonight," I answered. "If it's not too much trouble."

"Only as much as it takes to boil water."

She put a kettle on a burner, a cup and a jar of Taster's Choice on the counter, and mixed herself a drink.

I said: "You still drink Scotch, I see."

She came back to me, her drink in her hand. "Better label, that's all," she said with a shrug.

She eyed me, smiling. "Well, now that you're here, make yourself at home. I'll turn the thermostat up if you're cold."

"I'm not staying that long."

But she came up and took off my hat and tossed it on the couch. "Stay awhile," she said. "I'm wide awake now—"

I took my hand out of my coat pocket, showed the pink clutch bag. "This yours?"

She was surprised all right—and pleased. "Oh, I'm so glad you found it."

"You lost it?"

She nodded. "Left it in the powder room. When I went back for it it was gone."

"When?"

"Oh, some time during the evening..." Then, sharply: "Why? Something wrong?"

"Yeah," I said slowly, "like a three dollar bill." I let her hang a moment, then: "Rudy's dead."

She just stared at me, her cigaret burning between her fingers.

Over in the kitchen area the kettle began to whistle.

"Jud..." Her voice was strained. "How?"

I slipped my right hand into my coat pocket and tossed the

automatic on the couch beside her.

"Someone held this close to his temple and shot him."

She looked at the gun, then back at me. "Oh, God..." She sank down into a chair, ground her cigaret out in an ash tray. She repeated it slowly: "Oh, God..."

I went into the kitchen and turned the burner off under the kettle. Lola's gaze followed me.

"Where is he?"

"Back at the restaurant," I said. "On ice." I shrugged. "He'll keep—until tomorrow night, anyway."

Lola ran her pink tongue across her lips. "You mean you haven't called the police?"

"No." I pointed to her clutch bag. "I found that near Rudy's body."

Her eyes widened. "Jud—you don't believe—?"

I picked up the small automatic. "This gun is yours, isn't it?"

She eyed it. "I don't know. It could be." She was frightened. "Rudy bought one like it for me, when we began receiving threats..."

She started to dig into her clutch bag.

I said: "You mean—like this?"

She glanced at the folded piece of paper I held out to her. "Yes. I had one like it in my

bag. I showed it to Rudy this afternoon." She shuddered. "My God, I'm not even keeping track of time. It was yesterday."

"Rudy told me about threats," I said. "That's why he hired me."

"I'm afraid of guns. Rudy kept it in his office." She stood up, facing me. She looked appealingly helpless. "You don't believe I killed him, do you?"

"It's not me—it's what the police will believe," I said.

She sagged back into her chair. "Sure, it's been hell for me, living with Rudy." She turned her eyes to me, moist, asking for understanding. "I wanted something better than a walkup flat, a beat up car and a big day shopping at the local supermarket. That's why I left you for Rudy. He promised me everything I wanted. He said he had connections in Hollywood, that singing in Barney's Castle would be a step up..."

She pointed to her purse. "Jud, I swear I lost it in the powder room. Whoever dropped it by Rudy's body knew it was mine." She got up and came to me. "Jud, please...help me. Someone's trying to frame me—hurt me..."

She pressed against me, her perfume coming up between us, holding...all right, I was still in love with her. I took her in

my arms and kissed her, then I pushed her gently away.

"It'll be twenty-four hours before someone finds the body," I said. "I'll see what I can do."

I picked up my hat and went out.

VII

IT WAS TOO LATE to go to bed. I stopped in at an all night coffee shop, tanked up on three cups of caffeine, skimmed the early morning edition of the *Times*.

There were a number of folks in smog city who would shed no tears over Larry Rudy's departure, and at least a few of them had been in Barney's Castle last night.

I remembered the airline folder I had taken from Rudy's desk. It looked like Rudy had planned to meet someone at the L.A. airport this morning, and I had an idea who.

The Mexicana airline has a small waiting room. I spotted Mrs. Callahan standing by the windows, looking out over the loading area. She glanced impatiently at her watch, tapped her foot nervously against the small bag on the floor beside her.

I came up behind her and said: "Waiting for someone, Mrs. Callahan?"

She turned quickly and I saw surprise flash across her face.

Then her voice dripped ice: "Oh, it's you!"

She sniffed her distaste, started to turn away.

"Acapulco is a great place this time of the year," I said, unmoved.

She was startled. "Don't tell me you're going?"

"I'd like to. But, well, you know how it is with the poor working man..." I looked around. "Your husband with you?"

"Charley?" She laughed. "He's in Palm Springs, playing golf, what else?" Then she frowned. "You looking for him?"

I nodded. "Did he come home last night?"

Lila Callahan looked displeased. "No. He usually stays in Palm Springs whenever there is a tournament on—which is most of the winter." She looked past me now, a bit anxiously. I knew who she was waiting for.

I said, "If you're waiting for Rudy, he isn't coming."

She turned a pair of hard eyes on me. "How do you know—?"

I handed her the airline ticket I had found in Rudy's desk. "I guess you'll have to find yourself another playmate for Acapulco, Mrs. Callahan."

"Not coming!" Lola exploded. "Why the dirty son of—"

I cut her off. "Tut, tut, Mrs. Callahan. It's not kosher to speak ill of the dead."

"I'll speak any way I wish," she began, then, as it sunk in: "Dead?"

I nodded. "As a mackerel."

I left her with that look on her face...shocked, unbelieving.

It was a two hour drive to Palm Springs from the L.A. airport. Those who can afford the time and the money come here to get away from the chill and the clouds that hang over the city in winter. It's a long drive if you're in a hurry, but the way I figured it Charley Callahan didn't mind. He could have made it into L.A. easy enough...get to Larry Rudy through the back entrance...and it answered one of the things that had been bothering me. Charley was big enough to haul Rudy's carcass from the office and dump him into that ice bin...

I parked in front of the Shadow Hills Motor-Hotel and went inside. I asked a few questions...the desk clerk was helpful.

I found Charley Callahan on the seventh green, about to tee off. His partner, Geoffrey Nash, was wiping his ball clean at the wash stand.

Callahan was a tall, spare-built man, distinguished-

looking with gray temples and sideburns against a tanned, clear skin. He didn't look his age which nudged the middle fifties. He was healthy, vigorous—but he cared more for golf than women.

He took a couple of preliminary swipes at the grass, then stepped back, addressed the ball carefully, and started his swing.

I said, "Mr. Callahan..."

He jerked his head as he swung. The ball sliced high and deep, falling on the wrong fairway.

He stared at me in disbelief. I was still watching the flight of the ball.

"Nice shot," I said.

Callahan raised his club, murder in his eyes. I stepped back. "Hey, wait a minute. Peace, man."

Callahan paused, quivering. "I ought to brain you! No jury in the world would convict me!"

Nash looked on, smoking a cigaret. He was a slight man with a wisp of blond mustache. He looked just like what he was; an old line Britisher who had seen a lot and was disturbed by little.

I said, "I want to talk to you, Charley."

Callahan was setting down another tee. He shook his driver at me.

"Get out of here!"

"It's about Larry Rudy," I persisted. "And your wife."

This got to him. He lowered his club, said angrily: "You running a gossip column now, Banning?"

"Where were you last night?"

Callahan ran his fingers through his hair. "Look, Banning... I like you. I know you like to play detective. But I'm in an important game, and you bother me. Now will you get away from me?"

I shrugged. "Your wife's on her way to Acapulco. Rudy was going to join her there." I let this sink in, then: "Did you know about it?"

Callahan eyed me for a moment. "No," he said coldly.

"You know your partner was sleeping with your wife?"

It hit home. He shook his head, but the truth was in his face.

"Where were you last night?" I repeated.

"Right here in Palm Springs."

"I hope you can prove it."

"Sure I can prove it," Callahan said. "Why?"

I scratched an itch on the tip of my nose. "Rudy's dead," I said.

The shock on Callahan's face looked genuine. "Dead?"

"Bullet dead," I said.

Callahan sagged back against his golf cart.

"Your Mercedes is parked in front of your room," I continued. "I checked. Service sticker says you had it in the garage yesterday... the mileage is still on it. I checked your speedometer. There's a three hundred mile difference. Now that's a lot of driving for a man who says he didn't leave Palm Springs. But it comes out right, give or take a few miles, if you drove it into L.A., checked on your wife, then went to the restaurant and shot Rudy nice and dead."

Callahan shook his head, but his face was pale. "I loaned my car to a friend. I don't know where he went with it."

"Can you prove it?" I asked quickly.

"If I have to." He recovered his composure then, shook a finger at me. "Look, I've got eleven more holes to finish. If you have any more questions, talk to my lawyer."

I watched his tee off, then get in his electric golf cart and drive off. He could have done it, I thought. But somehow I believed him. Still, it took a pretty big man to haul Rudy's body from the office to—

I stopped in midthought. I'd been figuring it was a man who had killed Rudy. But there was a redhead who was big enough. Only thing, was she mad enough to commit murder?

VIII

I DROVE PAST Barney Castle, but I didn't go inside. The restaurant was open for business. I spotted Lola's car in the parking lot. She had come in to work much earlier than usual. Gene, Frenchy and the other help would be wondering why Rudy wasn't showing up, but it wasn't the first time Rudy skipped coming to the office, especially after a big day like yesterday.

The office building I was looking for was only a mile from the restaurant. On fashionable Wilshire Boulevard, it was an older building, flanked by newer high rise structures. I found a slot for the MG, parked, and went inside.

The directory told me to go to the sixth floor. I took the creaky elevator up, walked down the hallway and stopped at 603. The nameplate on the door read: *D.D. Hollister. By Appointment Only.*

I tried the door. It was locked. I glanced at my watch. Not quite two o'clock. They were probably out to lunch. I was about to leave when I heard someone sobbing. It came from somewhere inside Hollister's office.

I tried the door again, then took out a lock pick and started to work on it.



Hollister must have walked very softly because I didn't hear him. Only his voice: "Why don't we try the key?"

I turned, shrugged, slipped the pick back inside my pocket. Hollister fitted his key to the lock, turned it, pushed the door open.

"After you," he said.

I walked inside. The waiting room was typical of any dentist's office: Inexpensive but comfortable chairs, a couch, a long low table with magazines scattered over it. An open door gave me a glimpse of a dentist's chair.

"Which one is it?"

I gave him a puzzled look.

"You're the man who called about an emergency... impacted wisdom tooth, wasn't it?"

I said, "No. It wasn't me."

Hollister frowned. "Haven't I seen you before?"

"Barney's Castle," I said. "Last night."

Dennis Hollister shot a quick glance to his wife as she came to the doorway of the inner office. . . .she was dressed in white working uniform. There was a bruise on her right cheek and her mascara was running.

"Call the police," he told her.

His wife didn't move.

"He was trying to break in here! Call the police, dammit!"

Dee turned slowly to go back into the office. I beat her to the phone, clamped my hand over hers.

"I'll call," I said. I looked back to Hollister. "We'll tell them about Rudy."

I was watching Hollister's face. He stopped short just behind me, his eyes narrowing. But there was no alarm in them.

"Tell them what?" he asked harshly.

"Rudy's dead," I said. "Shot."

Dee gasped. Hollister spun around to the back of his desk, took a .38 Berreta from a drawer. He shoved Dee into a chair, levelled the muzzle at me.

"Well, well," he sneered. "You just made my day, whoever you are."

"Banning," I said. "Private investigator."

Dee looked at me, fear in her eyes. But it didn't bother Hollister.

"Go right ahead," he said, waving his pistol. "Call the police—"

Dee broke in quickly: "No, no . . ."

Hollister shot a look at her.

"They . . . they'll ask questions," his wife said wretchedly.

I nodded. "They usually do."

The big redhead got up and went to her husband. "It'll ruin you, Dennis."

Hollister pushed her away. "Ruin me? In this town?" There was bitterness in the sneer. "Infidelity is the in thing, or didn't you know? Hell, a man doesn't get ahead these days, unless his wife plays around all over hell."

"All right," Dee said. "I played around with Rudy. But I had to—"

"Sure," Hollister cut her off. He was forgetting me. "He twisted your arm, didn't he?"

Dee's voice faltered. "In a way . . ."

She looked at me then, her world crumbling down around her. "You or the police will find out anyway."

"Find out what?" Hollister snapped.

She turned to him, her hand going up to the bruise on her cheek. "What you don't know about me, Dennis. What Rudy

knew." Her voice choked. "I was born in Georgia. My mother was a carnny girl, a red-headed stripper. My father was a black roustabout—" She sucked in a ragged breath. "Goddam trick of fate, wasn't it? I came out like my mother, red hair and all!"

I looked at Hollister. His eyes showed a deep, unbelieving shock.

Dee turned back to me. "Go ahead," she said. "Call the police." She was choking back tears. "But I didn't kill Rudy. I useta dream of doing it...but I didn't have the nerve."

I shook my head. No sense in making matters worse. Hollister was in a daze, the gun in his hand forgotten.

"Don't be too hard on her, Hollister," I said. "It's a tough world...we all have to play the cards we draw..."

I don't know if he heard me. I left them alone, closing the door behind me.

IX

TIME WAS beginning to run out for me. I went back over the people who had been in the restaurant last night, remembering the tourists from Indiana—I stopped in a phone booth to check out the address and drove to Hollywood to the Sea Shell Motel.

It was a gray day again. The sun had sneaked out for a look around two, but the offshore clouds caught up with it and I knew that would be all the sunshine we'd have for the day.

The manager answered my question by pointing toward the pool in back. I headed that way.

The four of them were the only ones by the pool. Rodell and Nick, in swim trunks, were sitting around a poolside table, drinking beer. The two women, in bikinis, occupied lounges... Rodell's wife, Sally, was applying liberal amounts of sun tan lotion to her body. None of them noticed me coming in.

I could hear complaining: "Where's the sun, Arthur? You said it was always sunny in California."

The big man glanced at her, a beer can in his hand. "Aw, quit yapping. What'd you be doing in Indiana this time of the year? Freezing your tootsies off, that's what." He looked at Nick. "Jeez, my head hurts like hell!"

Sally sighed. She lay back, adjusted her dark Hollywood type sunglasses over her eyes. "Think we're getting a tan?" she said to Penny.

Penny said: "Sure. They say the burn you get through these gray clouds is something fierce."

"Well, I hope so," Sally sniggered. "It'll be hard explaining to Nancy and Meg if we don't go back home with one of those glorious California tans we read about."

Nick drained his beer. He got up and walked to the pool and gingerly dipped his toe into it. "Hey," he said. "It's heated." He turned to Rodell. "C'mon. A little exercise will sweeten your disposition—"

He stopped short as he spotted me. The big man swung around to look.

"Well, well," Rodell said, squinting. "If it ain't my olé buttinsky buddy, the Barney Castle hawkshaw!" He turned to Nick. "Ain't he the gook who shoved me around last night at Rudy's joint?"

Nick recognized the temper in the big man's tone. "Art," he said quickly, "wait a minute."

Sally sat up. "Arthur!"

The big man ignored all of them. He came up out of his chair, grabbed a chunk of my trench coat before I could fend him off. He was quick for a big man.

"Listen, hawkshaw!" he snarled, shoving his face up close to mine in old Marine Sergeant style, "I oughta break every bone in your—"

I jammed the heel of my right hand under his jaw, snapping his head back. His

hold loosened and he stumbled against the poolside table.

I said, "Easy, mister. No rough stuff—"

He came to me with a roar. I sidestepped, grabbed his arm as he went by, jerked him around, kneed him in the stomach. The breath whooshed out of him. He bent over and I swung him around, planted my foot against his butt and shoved.

The big man shot forward, slammed into Nick—they fell into the pool.

I walked to the edge, looked down. Nick surfaced first. I held out a helping hand and pulled him up on the deck. He gave me a wary look as he came up.

Rodell choked on a mouthful of chlorinated water. "Give me a hand!" he yelled. "I can't swim!"

We pulled him out. "Sorry," I said. "I guess you needed a little cooling off."

"Arthur!" his wife scolded. "You leave that nice man alone!"

"Leave *him* alone?" Rodell turned to me, grinning. "Hey, that was pretty good, hawkshaw. . . ."

"Jud Banning," I said.

The big man was still coughing up chlorine. "You ever been in the Marines, Banning?"

"Army," I said. "Winter of '51. Korea." I kept a poker face.

"My outfit had to go in and save the hides of the First Marine Division up around Chosin."

Rodell exploded. "Save us? The Army? Why you—"

Nick grabbed him before he could take another swing at me. "You hear him, Nick?" he roared. "The goddam dogface's got more gall than...than...".

Words finally failed him.

Nick said: "Look, Banning—about last night. Art was drunk. He didn't mean anything—"

Rodell broke in, snarling: "Not a damn thing! Just wanted to break that old mess sergeant's neck, that's all!"

I was ready for almost anything but that. "Rudy—a mess sergeant?"

Rodell nodded. "C Company, Fifth Marines...in Korea. Had the whole company in hock to him—"

"We couldn't prove it," Nick cut in.

"Hell, we didn't dare!" Rodell snarled. "That chiseler had more pull with the upstairs brass than the Company C.O." He looked wrathfully at his companion. "We all owed him, Nick. When we couldn't pay in money he took something else. There was a mamasan in K-Nine...she had a daughter. Damn good looking, for a gook—"

Sally swung around to him. "What about this good looking gook?"

Rodell choked on the question. Nick came to his rescue. "She was Larry Tinker's girl—"

"You shut up!" Sally snapped. She cornered her husband on the edge of the pool. "Well, what about this good looking Korean girl?"

Rodell tried to back away from her nearly fell into the pool again. "Jeez, Sally," he said. "I told you—"

"Were you shacking up with her?"

Rodell looked shocked. "It was Larry..." He shot a look at Nick.

"Sure," Nick corroborated. "It was Larry Tinker—"

Nick's wife bounced up from her lounge. "How do you know?"

This was getting me nowhere. I said, "Look. I don't care who was shacking up with who or where or when."

Sally slashed her towel at me. I shielded my face and backed off.

"You keep out of this!" she yelled.

Rodell took a deep breath and roared: "Goddam it! Shut up! All of you!"

Sally recognized the point of no return in her husband's voice...she backed off, stopping by Nick and Penny.

Rodell turned to me. "Larry Rudy was a chiseler, a card sharp, and a blackmailer. He had more on everybody in C Company than the Chinks had expendables. I waited almost seventeen years to get my hands on his fat neck. If you hadn't stopped me last night I would have killed him!"

"Somebody did," I said.

Rodell frowned. Nick and the women suddenly looked frightened.

"Someone shot him in the head—with this." I showed them the small automatic.

There was a shocked silence for a moment, then Rodell said: "You think I did it?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Did you?"

Rodell pointed a thick finger at the automatic in my hand. "That's a woman's gun, Banning. I've got a .45 automatic home—war souvenir. I've never fired the damn thing since I was released. Sure, I wanted to kill Rudy. But—" He held up his hands, his fingers curling. "I would have used these. Not that thing. Shooting's too good for the—"

"Arthur!" Sally interrupted. Her voice was shocked. "He's dead!"

"I'll be a happy pallbearer!" Rodell snarled. He swung back to me. "I was stoned when we got in here last night. . . I didn't

get up until noon. I still had a hangover. But hearing about Rudy just cured it."

"Can you prove it?"

"Sure we can prove it," Nick cut in. "Art talks a lot. But he didn't kill Rudy. Nobody here did."

I had to believe them. I slipped the automatic back into my pocket. "Maybe you're right. But, don't go home right away." I grinned to make them feel easier. "We might just need you—for pallbearers."

X

I SAT BEHIND the wheel of my MG and thought things over. It was getting on in the afternoon. I kept thinking of Lola, scared, depending on me to clear her. I tracked back over yesterday's pandemonium, but I was beginning to go around in circles.

One trip around the circle brought me to Leslie Marsh. Maybe I should have looked her up first. Not that I thought she had killed Rudy. But she was the last person to see him the last person to see him last night, alive or dead. I remembered her as a kid who had grown up with hard times. I knew her mother, a faded actress, Hollywood burned. She had married a bum with more promise in his mouth than a

MURDER ON ICE

monkey has fleas... when he died he left her with a kid and a pocketful of debts.

I knew Leslie worked at Magic Mountain, one of those Disneyland imitations, north of L.A. I thought of driving up, then I remembered there was one more prospect I hadn't called on... and I had always wanted an excuse to run Bill Jennings up the wall.

It took me a half hour driving the city streets until I hit the Pacific Coast Highway and headed north toward Malibu. It was getting dark when I got there.

Jennings' beach house stood alone on an isolated stretch of beach. He was a swinger all right... girls and money, and going after both had swung him right out of the California Bar Association and a job with the D.A.'s office. I was betting he couldn't swing himself out of a murder charge.

The house looked dark, untenant ed. I tried the front door, but it was locked. I looked inside the garage before going around to the back, stopping just under the open deck that hung on stilts over the wet sand. The surf was rolling in, breaking on the beach with white hissing streaks.

Hell, I thought... Jennings could be anywhere by now... Mexico... Alaska...



The voice that intruded on my thoughts was pleasant: "Hello, Irish."

I looked up. It was just light enough for me to make out a woman on a redwood framed lounge. She was twisted around, looking at me through the railing.

She chuckled. "Can't be anybody else... not with that hat and trenchcoat."

I walked up the steps. I could see her better now, sitting up. Madge was wearing a terry cloth robe over not much of anything I could see.

"Looking for a spot to go skinny dipping?" she said.
"I'm looking for Jennings."

"Oh—he's out." Her voice was casual.

"Where?"

She hesitated, then: "Drove into town—" She smiled. "Hey, can I fix you something? Irish coffee, maybe?"

"No, thanks," I said. I sat on the railing and studied her. "His car's still here. I looked."

She shrugged. "So I lied."

She lay back on the lounge and stretched lazily. "Stay a while. You were nice to me last night. I owe you something."

"Don't, put yourself out," I told her.

She looked me over carefully now. "Gee, anybody ever tell you you look like Humphrey Bogart?"

"Lot of people." I looked off down the darkening strip of lonely beach. "Where is he, Madge?"

"Bill went for a walk. He likes to be alone sometimes."

I eased off the railing. "I'll go keep him company."

"He won't like it."

"But I will."

I started down the stairs. Madge's voice was still pleasant, but there was a warning in it. "I wouldn't do that, Mr. Banning."

I turned and looked at her.

She was standing at the head of the stairs, a snub-nosed Police .38 in her hand.

"Bill has a lot on his mind.

He doesn't want to be disturbed."

"I'll bet," I said drily. Then: "You always carry a gun with you?"

"It's pretty lonely around here," she said, smiling. "A girl has to protect her virtue, doesn't she?"

"Of course," I nodded. "Such as it is."

She motioned with the gun. "Aw, come on, Irish . . . come up and join me. You might catch a chill out there."

She backed up as I came up the stairs. "We're flying out to San Paolo," she said. She sounded happy about it.

I paused. "San—what?"

She wrinkled her nose, trying to remember. It was obvious this sort of thing was a strain on her.

"It's in South America someplace. Hey, did you know it's summer down there now? Bill says he knows where we can get a place all to ourselves . . . we can go skinny dipping all day long, if we want—"

I interrupted her. "Why don't you put that gun away, Madge? Your virtue's safe with me. Besides, it makes me nervous—"

I turned slightly as I heard someone walking toward the house along the beach.

Madge called out: "That you, Bill?"

The shadowy figure stopped. Madge said: "We've got a visitor—"

Jennings whirled and started to run off.

I made a flying tackle at Madge. . .we fell on the lounge with me on top of her. The gun went flying out of her hand.

"Sorry," I said.

Madge was indignant. "See what I mean? Somebody's always trying to rape me—"

But I was already vaulting over the railing, chasing after Jennings.

The beach curved along steep cliffs, ending abruptly at a rocky promontory. Too many girls and wild parties had taken some of the stamina from Jennings. . .he was puffing badly as he started to scramble up the rocks. He got out on a ledge and the sheer rise above him trapped him. He looked back to me as I stopped below the ledge. Spray from breaking waves soaked him.

I said: "Going for a swim, Bill?"

He craned his neck, peering down at me. "Oh, hell!" he said. "It's you!" He seemed relieved. "What are you doing, chasing me like that?"

"Why are you running?" I answered.

He started to scramble down the rocks toward me. "Rudy send you?"

I frowned at him. "In a way."

"Well, tell him for me he can go to hell!" Jennings said.

"He's probably there already."

Jennings paused. The waves were breaking around the rocks, washing up the sand toward me.

"You trying to tell me something, Jud?"

"I'll put it right on the nose," I said. "Rudy's dead. Someone shot him."

"Gee!" It wasn't Jennings' voice—it came from behind me. I guess the sound of the waves had covered her approach.

I turned slowly. I had Larry Rudy's gun in my pocket, but I didn't want to use it.

Madge, in bare feet and loosely bound robe was only a few feet away. The gun in her hand was pointed at me, and I had the feeling she knew how to use it.

"That's too bad—him getting shot," Madge said. She looked at Jennings. "He was such a good friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"Give me that gun!" Jennings snarled.

She backed off. "I don't want anybody hurt."

I grinned sourly at Jennings. "Rudy? A friend?"

"That's what you said, didn't you, Bill? Glad you had a friend like Rudy?"

"That's not what I meant," Jennings said. He held out his hand. "Come on, give me that gun."

Madge pouted. "It's mine. You gave it to me."

Jennings ran his fingers through his hair. "Jesus Christ! How'd I ever get hooked up with such a dumb broad?"

"Some people have a knack for it," I said. I shoved my hand into my coat pocket. "I hear you're flying to South America tomorrow."

Jennings stiffened. Then he took a long step toward Madge. "And a big mouth, too, eh?" He moved fast then, grabbing her arm, twisting the gun out of her hand. He swung around to me.

He was a little late. Rudy's automatic was in my hand, pointing at him.

"One murder should be enough, Bill," I said easily. "Let's not overdo it." I motioned. "Throw that .38 away...underhand and easy."

Bill hesitated. Madge unconcernedly began to adjust her blonde wig. "You kill somebody?" she asked him.

Jennings gave her a dirty look, then underhanded the gun toward me. It skidded on the wet sand and went behind me.

"Oh, hell," he said wearily. "Put that gun away, Jud. I

didn't kill Rudy—I didn't even know he was dead."

"Of course not," I said. "You just had a sudden urge to go to South America for a skinny dip."

"No," Jennings snarled. "For my health."

Madge was surprised. "Gee," she said solicitously, "I didn't know you were sick, Bill."

Jennings clenched his teeth in frustrated anguish. "Rudy was pressuring me for something I couldn't deliver," he said. "An old police record... some big political boy in town didn't like it being in the files. Rudy promised to get it for him...then he put the arm on me."

Bill licked his lips. "I have some friends in the department...with enough money some of them will do anything. But I couldn't put it together...not as fast as Rudy wanted it, anyway. He laid it on the line to me last night—that's why I was thinking of leaving town—"

I backed up, picked up his gun. "Sure," I said, not buying it. "But first you went back to Barney's Castle...say, some time between midnight and one o'clock this morning—"

"Is that when Rudy was killed?"

I didn't say anything but Jennings gave out with a short

laugh of relief. "Hell, Jud, between midnight and three this morning me and this dumb blonde were in the Malibu precinct jail—"

"They were very nice to me at the station," Madge said.

"Oh, shut up!" Jennings snapped. He turned to me. "I made the mistake of letting her drive my Porsche home last night from the restaurant. She gunned the damn thing down the Pacific Coast Highway like she was racing in the California 500. The cop who picked us up is no friend of mine...he wanted to give us a sobriety test and I argued with him. We wound up in the precinct jail until a lawyer friend of mine came in with bail..."

He saw the look in my eyes and said bitterly: "Check it out, Banning. It's all there on the police blotter."

XI

I CHECKED him out. For once Bill Jennings had told a straight story.

All the way back along the San Diego Freeway I kept thinking of the ice in that bin getting lower...any time now Frenchy or one of the other waiters would spot Rudy.

I had one last lead: Leslie Marsh. I didn't think she killed Rudy. She didn't have time, at

least not time enough to drag him from his office and dump him into that ice bin. And she wasn't big enough, either. But she saw something, something that scared the hell out of her. Maybe she'd tell me...if Tony boy wasn't hanging around making waves.

It was late when I parked in the Magic Mountain parking lot, paid my entrance fee at the turnstyle and went up to the observation tower.

Leslie Marsh was on the night shift at one of the twin elevators. She was standing by the door at the base of the tower. A half dozen people were waiting to take the ride up:

I pushed through to her. "Miss Marsh," I said.

She turned, saw me, looked frightened. The elevator doors were sliding open behind her; people started to press forward.

I flashed my wallet at them, said: "Police business," and pushed her inside. The doors slid shut. "Go ahead," I said. "Take her up."

Leslie obeyed. Her eyes were wide, staring at me. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what happened last night at the restaurant."

Leslie pressed back against the elevator side. "Oh, God!" she said. "I knew someone would come. All day I knew.

But Tony...he wanted me to run away with him."

"Your boy friend?"

She nodded. "He said the police would frame me."

"Nice guy this Tony," I remarked drily. "Then you knew Rudy was dead?"

"Yes. But I didn't kill him! I swear it!" She pressed the knuckle of her right hand to her mouth. "I had an appointment—I was supposed to see him earlier, but I got held up. I was worried...I didn't know how he'd feel, my coming in late like I did."

I waited. The words came tumbling out now.

"I went back to his office...I was over by the ice bin when I thought I heard someone going out the back door. I thought it might be Rudy, going home...so I went to the back door, looked out. His car was still there. I went back to his office. The door was open—I looked inside. He wasn't there. I didn't know what to think. Then...then I heard it—"

The doors were sliding open...we had reached the top. I stepped out in front of her...and someone grabbed me from behind. A voice said harshly: "Run, Les, run! I'll handle him!"

I might have guessed Tony Limo would be hanging around. I chopped his hands away,

turned...Limo started for me again, but stopped as I slipped my hand into my coat pocket. I said quietly: "That's right, it's a gun."

Limo stood undecided. A few people on the observation platform looked at us.

I waved to them. "It's nothing, folks. Just a little family disagreement." I made a motion with my head. "Nice view from up here. Let's take a look while we talk."

Tony Limo and Leslie Marsh followed me to the grille overlooking the park. I looked at Limo. "You knew Rudy was dead?"

Limo nodded, sullen. "Les told me."

"And all you could advise her was to run away?"

"It's my fault," Leslie said quickly. "I knew I should have gone to the police."

"What'd the fuzz ever do for anybody?" Tony Limo sneered.

I gave him a hard look, turned to Leslie. "All right—what happened?"

Leslie looked out over the park...the glittering play of lights, the wheeling buckets in the sky, the carnival laughter and the merry tinkle of merry-go-round music...

"I was standing by the ice when I heard it," she said. Her voice trembled. "A...a sort of gurgle...then a groan...It

came from inside the ice bin. I opened the lid. Rudy was inside, looking up at me, his eyes bulging. He raised an arm up to me, asking for help...then he died...right in front of me, he died."

She started to cry then, reliving it. "All I wanted to do then was to get away from there...as far away as I could—"

Limo said coldly: "If you're a cop, to hell with you, mister! Les didn't kill him. But I know a lot of people who ain't sorry someone did."

I ignored him. "When you looked inside Rudy's office," I said to Leslie, "what did you see? What was on his desk?"

"On his desk?"

I nodded. "Anything unusual?"

Her voice faltered. "There were two glasses with whiskey in them, I think."

"No ice bucket?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"I...I'm sure. I remember thinking Rudy must have had someone in for a drink, just before he left..."

She looked at me, dread in her eyes. "What are you going to do about me?"

"Me?" I said. "Nothing." I shrugged. "But the police will want to ask you a lot of questions later. Nothing I can do."

I turned to Tony. "If you're both smart, she'll be around to answer them!"

I WAS ON high ground, rolling down the freeway. Below me I could see the lights of the Valley. The San Fernando Valley to the rest of the country, just The Valley to us who live here; a part of Los Angeles, a city like any other.

I looked straight ahead, feeling rotten. It had been there all the time, but I hadn't seen it. I guess it was because I didn't want to see it.

It was almost midnight when I slid the MG into Barney's Castle parking lot, waited for the two men in the other car to get out, then walked around to the entrance. I asked them to wait...they nodded.

Lola was at the piano when I stepped inside. No one noticed me right away. Gene was busy mixing drinks. There weren't many people in the place tonight...I knew Gene would be closing up soon.

Lola was singing a torch song popular in the thirties. She looked beautiful, radiant. Her voice was never better. Just like a Polly Bergen at her best, maybe.

I let her finish. She bowed to the scattered applause, picked up her drink sitting on the piano top next to Hoagy

McAllister's. Then she saw me coming toward her...

"Like it, Jud?" She was smiling. "It was one of your favorites."

"Yeah," I said. "Nice song."

"I sang it for you," she said. She moved back then, took a small hand mirror from her clutch bag, touched up her lips. "You find out who killed Rudy?"

I nodded.

"I'm glad," she said.

"I'm not."

She looked closely at me then, trying to read my face.

"Rudy wasn't much of a human being...but he knew about people," I said. "About me, anyway."

Lola's voice held an edge of fear. "Meaning?"

"He hired me to do a job...he knew I'd finish it."

Her smile flashed on again, but it was unsure of itself. "He's dead, Jud. You don't owe him anything."

"The ice bucket, Lola," I said. "It was the key."

Her fingers tightened around the small mirror. "What are you talking about?"

"I was looking for a man," I said. "A man big enough to drag Rudy's body from his office and dump him into the ice bin. I couldn't see a woman doing it." It was not easy telling her. "But the killer didn't

have to," I continued. "Rudy did it for her."

Lola stiffened, the lines of desperation radiating from around her mouth. She moistened her lips.

"Jud—please..."

I went on doggedly: "The killer had to be someone Rudy knew...someone he let get close enough to put that .22 to his temple and pull the trigger..."

She was staring at me now.

"You didn't go home when you told Hoagy...you went in to see Rudy. He fixed a couple of drinks, to talk it over. But you have to have ice with your Scotch, don't you? So Rudy went out with his ice bucket to get some...he must have had to lean way over by that time...there wasn't much ice left. That's when you killed him, Lola."

A hard laugh broke from her lips. "Christ, Jud—what a story!"

"Rudy practically fell into the ice bin, didn't he?"

She backed off a pace. "You're crazy! The ice bucket was on Rudy's desk—"

"No. You had it when you heard Leslie Marsh coming. You ran out the back and probably hid behind one of the trash bins. Then, when she left, you slipped back inside, put the ice bucket on his desk, dropped

the gun into my coat pocket." I shook my head. "A nice touch, that. Like those childish notes you printed...hard to trace back to you..."

She broke then. "Jud, I didn't mean...I didn't want it to be you."

I shrugged. But the hurt was still there...it would take a long time to go away.

"Why?" I asked. "Why kill him?"

"Rudy was leaving me," she said. Her voice was cold, brittle now. "Leaving me with nothing. I knew he was going away with Mrs. Callahan. She had the money...and he was getting tired of the restaurant. He had promised me everything, Jud...a career, Hollywood, furs, diamonds..."

"Yeah," I said. "Rudy was good at that—promising."

I turned and motioned to the two men waiting by the door. They started to walk toward us.

Lola shot a look at them. "Who are they?"

"They're from Homicide," I said. I took out a dime, handed it to her. "You'll need it," I said. "To call yourself a good lawyer."

I didn't look back. I'd had a bellyful.

It was raining when I stepped outside. A light rain. California in March. What the hell...tomorrow it could be sunny, warm, beautiful. That's the way things are around here.

I climbed into my MG and drove home.

COMING SOON:

HERBERT HARRIS

ARTHUR PORGES

TALMAGE POWELL

EVELYN PAYNE

JAMES HOLDING

NEW SHORT STORIES BY

MERLE AHERN

WILLIAM STORY

GARY BRANDNER

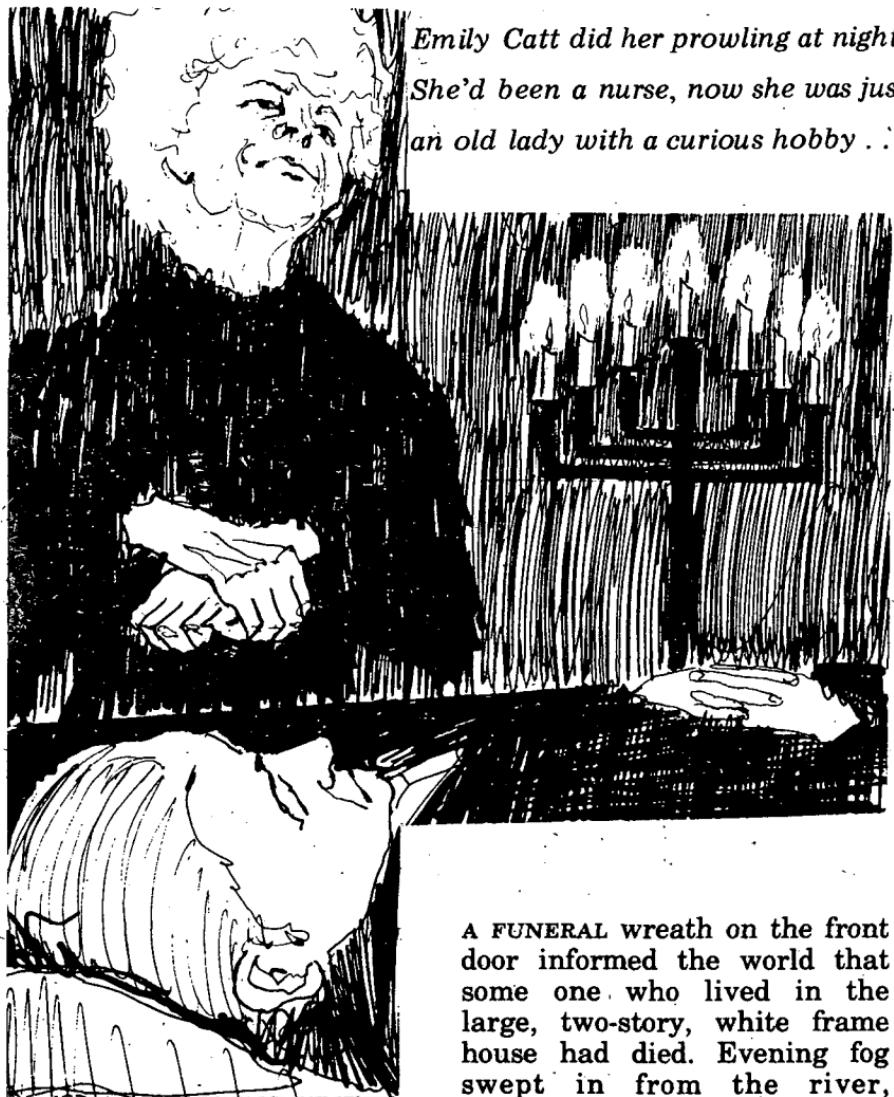
EDWARD WELLEN

ELEANOR ROBINS

Angel Of Mercy

by EDWIN P. HICKS

*Emily Catt did her prowling at night.
She'd been a nurse, now she was just
an old lady with a curious hobby . . .*



A FUNERAL wreath on the front door informed the world that some one who lived in the large, two-story, white frame house had died. Evening fog swept in from the river,

camouflaging the deepening shadows of night with shuddering uncertainty. A long, black, 1950 model limousine was parked with a half dozen more modern cars around the old house. The right front wheel of the limousine was up on the curb.

Inside the house a dozen mourners were maintaining a wake about the body of John McManus, one time mayor of the city, who had passed on to the other world at the age of eighty-five, following a stroke. Funeral services would be held in the mortuary chapel at ten a.m. next day.

His widow had insisted that her husband pass his final night atop the earth in the family home, and the group talking in low tones in the parlor, where the casket was placed, were old time friends of Mr. McManus and Mrs. McManus—all other relatives having preceded him years past in death.

Old time friends—except for one little white-haired lady; Emily Catt. Mrs. McManus vaguely recalled having heard the name—Was it during her husband's first term as mayor in '48-'50?

"Emily Catt?" she pondered to Rachel Wilson, who had been Mr. McManus' secretary during all his terms in City Hall.

"Who is she?" The mayor had not always been an old man.

"I think—I remember her. She used to be a nurse if I'm not mistaken."

"Oh," said Mrs. McManus. "She probably attended him back when he had his appendix out. John was always kind to the nurses or anyone else he was in contact with."

Rachel Wilson sniffed, but she nodded in agreement.

One of the neighbor women came to the door of the parlor and announced that dinner was ready. A fleeting smile crossed the face of Emily Catt. She was not the last person to find a place at the table, which was loaded with good things to eat that the neighbors had brought in.

It was amazing how trim little Mrs. Catt downed the food, a generous helping of roast, a giant serving of potatoes and rich gravy, an equally generous serving of English peas, sweet potatoes, a chicken breast, coconut cake, and two cups of coffee.

After the meal, Emily Catt shook hands with the widow McManus and everyone else in the room and departed—her ancient limousine sounding thunderous tones as it labored down the street, a single glowing headlight penetrating the thick, wet fog.

At ten o'clock sharp the following morning, Emily Catt parked her decrepit limousine with a final chug, not in front of the mortuary where final rites were to be said for John McManus, but in the parking lot of the two-hundred and fifty bed Liberty Hospital where she had worked for thirty-five years until her retirement a decade ago. Morning visiting hours began at ten o'clock.

"Good morning Emily. You're looking mighty sharp today," Maudie Thames greeted her from the information desk in the lobby.

"Morning," Emily said. She got on the elevator and didn't reappear until noon, when she had a sandwich in the cafeteria.

She had visited a dozen sick persons in the ward rooms, also old Mrs. Sanderson and Uncle Charlie Bingham who were in private rooms. Mrs. Sanderson, always as wiry and tenacious to life as a spotted she-leopard, might go any day, and then she might live a year, Emily's nursing eye told her.

But Uncle Charlie, overly fat and with high blood pressure, would be dying day after tomorrow. At his age and with his ponderous body, his heart would never be able to hold up against the final punch of pneumonia. Three or four

nights from now she would be attending his wake. Emily Catt wondered what kind of neighbors the Binghams had. At the telephone booth in the corridor, she thumbed through the directory to find the Bingham address. It was in a good part of town. The neighbors there would be first class and of course very generous.

It was the twentieth of the month. Two more weeks until she got her pension check, and she had only five dollars to go on until then. Thank heavens Old Betsy, as she called her black limousine, had a full tank of gasoline. But the old girl had had to have a new tire earlier in the month. Cars were so expensive—even 1950 model cars. Why hadn't her Willie been a successful business tycoon, instead of a musician and a dreamer?

Dear, impractical Willie!

He had died unexpectedly the day after they had made their last payment on the limousine, a bright, gleaming aristocrat in the world of vehicles in November, 1952. Yes, he had left her the black limousine but no insurance money. A heart seizure had taken him from her. She had been two years paying off the funeral expenses! Willie Catt had meant well, but he was so impractical!

She sighed. Well, there was

much to do before her day would be done.

That evening at five o'clock, Emily, prim and neat in her black dress, fluffed up her hair while looking into the rear view mirror of her old car, then stepped out onto the parking area, walked slowly towards the red brick house about which a dozen cars were parked. Instead of ringing the doorbell, she rapped gently inside a wreath of gladiolas.

A sad faced woman opened the door softly. "Come in," she whispered.

Emily entered the living room, inclined her head slightly to one person after another, and quietly accepted the chair that was offered her. The elderly, bald headed man in the brown suit and with a gray, expressionless face, was bound to be Henry Sargent, husband of Hattie Sargent who had passed on the night before, according to the obituary column in the paper.

She must be mindful of her manners and offer her condolences to him before leaving. Meanwhile it was good to sniff the odors of rich food wafting from the kitchen and discernable even above the fragrance of several sprays of flowers which had been sent to the residence.

Emily's gentle gray eyes moved silently from one person

to another. She didn't know a soul in the room. That didn't matter. Everyone thought she did. And the aromatic smell of coffee making started up her taste buds. It had been hours since she had had that sandwich at the hospital.

When the call came that dinner was served, she was the second in line at the table.

Later, just as the sun was disappearing leaving a great streak of scarlet across the western sky, Emily parked her car in the driveway of her home. Willie had always loved sunsets. She breathed deeply of the fragrant cedars which had grown so tall and so dense since her husband's death that it was difficult to see the front of her house from the street.

Such a shame, too, because the white frame house was kept a gleaming white. A coat of white paint had been applied every year since Willie's passing. The artist in Willie had always required that the exterior of the house look fresh and clean, during his lifetime, and she had always kept it that way. Emily also kept the inside in first class condition. Willie had required this.

This was home. Willie's clothes remained in his closet the way he had left them before going to the hospital, except that the pockets were filled

with moth balls. His piano was closed, the music he had been playing for the last time remained in place above the keyboard, without a speck of dust. She dusted "Willie's room" every day. In fact the entire study, which was closed off from the rest of the house, was spotless.

The sun had disappeared from sight, and the scarlet streak had paled when Emily entered the house and turned on a single light in the living room. She took her bath, put on her long, flannel night gown, knelt by the bed and recited her prayers. She thanked God for the full meal that she had eaten at the Sargent residence, asked God to take a message of love and good cheer to her beloved Willie, turned out the light and got in bed.

She lay there and smiled as she thought about the good things the neighbors of the Sargents had provided. In the morning she would scan the paper and select her next dining place. If she could get one good, free meal each evening she could manage all right, keep her house in repair, maintain her independence, and not have to go to a rest home. Some of her friends, too many of her friends, had been suggesting lately that she sell her house and get what she could out of

the old limousine, and move to a rest home.

"Not as long as I can manage to stay out," Emily snapped at them.

Sell her house indeed! Willie's clothes must never be moved from where he had put them. His piano must never be opened—his music must not be disturbed, not as long as she could prevent it.

She was quickly asleep.

NEXT MORNING Emily was having her morning oatmeal and black coffee as the paper hit her front screen. She got the paper and ignoring the scare headlines on the front page, turned directly to the obituary column. It was shocking! It wasn't fair! Old Mrs. Sanderson and Uncle Charlie Bingham had stolen a march on her. Both had died last night! It was thoughtless of them both to die on the same date. Now she would be able to manage only one meal out of the unexpected dual deaths.

Oh well, today she would visit the Greenwood Avenue Rest Home and size up the prospects there. Heaven forbid that she would ever have to live there. Not while she could drive old Betsy her limousine! Not while she had enough pension and management ability to live outside and independently.

Not while she had her good health.

Ten o'clock found Emily parking Betsy in front of the rest home. She carried a bouquet of chrysanthemums from her flower garden and placed them in a vase beside the bed of old Mrs. Henry Mormon. She had once served as a private nurse for Mrs. Mormon years ago—before the family had decided to put her in a rest home.

Mrs. Mormon had been bedfast then, and was still confined to her bed. Life was just one dreary monotony to the old lady who had only half her mind and that half living in the past—the past when she had a living husband and loving children.

Mrs. Hardy, the resident nurse, looked in upon them. She smiled when she saw Emily. "I see she's in good hands," said Nurse Hardy. "Call me if she needs anything."

Susan Hardy—Susan McGill she was when she enrolled as a beginner in nurse's training at Liberty Hospital. She had made an excellent nurse and was especially good with little children and old people.

Emily smiled and nodded. "Surely will, Susan."

Nurse Hardy had barely left the room, when Emily went to the side of the bed. Mrs. Mor-

mon didn't recognize her. She didn't know what was going on. She never would know—she never would be any better. Emily studied the old woman's face. Nothing registered. The expression never changed.

Emily picked up the spare pillow and pressed it down on the old face and held it there. The old lady hardly struggled. When it was over, Emily put the pillow back where she had picked it up, placed Mrs. Mormon's head in a natural position, arranging the features so that it looked like she was sleeping peacefully, then picked up her handbag and left the room.

The receptionist smiled at Emily. "Away so soon?"

"Yes. Want to see some friends down at the hospital."

"That old lady is a regular angel of mercy," she heard the receptionist say to the girl sitting next to her desk. "Used to be superintendent of nurses at the hospital. She comes out here two or three times a week."

Emily Catt did not go to the hospital. There was no need today. She would dine at the Bingham's tonight and with the Mormon family tomorrow evening. Then maybe with luck somebody else from a family with good neighbors would pass

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SCROGG'S END

Nancy and him, they had a perfect understanding, see. Like you know, ESP or something. But Ma had to push, and he always got nervous then, made mistakes . . .

by BRYCE WALTON

QUESTION. Would you say that a bit louder please., Mrs. Lowenberry? For the jury?

ANSWER. I said my boy was sweet and considerate. Just never caused a bit of trouble. Why sure he was temperamental, sensitive. But wasn't he special? Wasn't he an artist?

*From the trial testimony
of the Murderer's Mother.*

Morton-Lowenberry scraped mournfully through the stale debris of his kitchenette and mumbled, "My kingdom, my kingdom for a breakfast morsel," while he worried dangerously toward panic over his monthly allowance check which was nearly two weeks overdue. Lost in the mail? Stolen?

Or lordie, maybe something had happened to Ma!

Sweat sheened his pale forehead and then the phone rang. Or rather it seemed to scream at him as if some inner alarm of waiting fear had been touched off and he tensed in a crouch, pawing at his scraggly beard and peering warily through the pale wet walls of his eyes. Scrogg, he thought, feeling a twitch of fear above his left brow. What if it was Bill Scrogg calling to kill him with an eviction order?

He imagined the building super down in his shadowy basement pad, hunched over the phone, squat and sullen as an ape in a cage, his thick mouth curled in wicked waiting pleasure. Waiting for one little excuse like delinquent rent to kick a despised, sensitive, artis-



tic 'hippy' into the street. And Lowenberry couldn't cope out there. He'd tried the real world and he couldn't hack it.

Anyway, if he was booted out, Ma would learn about his recent lapse in lifetime frugality, parental respect, and obedience. She'd know about

his using vital rent and ration funds for camera and film for candid beauty shots of Nancy, and for blowing her incomparable image up to poster size and spreading her all over ceiling and walls. And for rare gifts for Nancy. A closet full of rare delicacies for fragile Nancy, ev-

erything waiting for just the right year, season, hour and sacred moment for final togetherness.

Ma wanted in the very worst way for him to marry, settle down, get on with the business of being a successful, wealthy, famous, but quite respectable painter. With the right girl of course. And Nancy was right. Ma just had to love Nancy. She already loved Nancy's pictures and all the things Morton wrote about her in his daily letters.

But Ma wouldn't stand for deception, irresponsibility and financial laxity, not for a minute. And when her temper flared it was an awful thing. She might even cut him off. Maybe she already had! The rent check! No-way out in the Jersey boondocks, Ma didn't know how he lived. She didn't know and there was no way she could've found out.

But if she did cut him off what would happen to everything? His vital need for loneliness, his slowly maturing talents, and his new, beautiful, first-time budding thing with Nancy? What would happen to it all?

He curled his bare toes against the cold board floor. The phone kept screaming and suddenly he realized that it just wouldn't be Scrogg. It was out

of character for Scrogg. Scrogg got his kicks using his ubiquitous master key to barge in on tenants unexpectedly, especially girls, eager to catch them in dishabille or whatever. He wouldn't bother to call, and the only other calls he ever got were wrong numbers or—

Ma! She hadn't called for a few days and she usually called every day and this must be her about the check. He gave a spasmodic lounge across his cramped one-room roachnest, sprawled over a lopsided sofa in a tangle of sour sheets and reached down for the phone lying with a black ominous shine, half buried in a nest of yellowed paperbacks, newspapers, nudie mags and dust mice. His grip was tight and spasmodic on the receiver, like a frightened child's.

"Hel—" he stammered. Swallowing against the dryness in his throat, he tried again. "Hello?"

"Hi there, sonny." He flinched. Ma's voice was even louder than usual. It might have been right there on the sofa beside him. "You're all right, sonny? You're not puny?"

"Oh no, Ma. Just deep into another painting. And you know how I am when I'm creating." He looked nervously at his watch. Nearly eleven. And Monday, Nancy's day off from

work at the candy store. She always took her sack of garbage out to the disposal chute at eleven every Monday morning, and he was always there and they could vibe with silent secret looks and wordless promises of intimate delights. But now he wouldn't be able to meet her. Ma always talked. And talked—

"Oh those wild far out moods of yours, sonny. I know, I know. What's your new masterpiece about?"

"It's an—uh—abstract."

"Abstract what?"

"Just an abstract." He scratched at the creepy itch in his beard. She usually called to check on him, and to ask for favors like write her more often or pick up something special for her at an 'arty' store, so she could *wow* her prosaic neighbors.

But this time it could be something about the check.

He wanted to ask, relieve the anxious ache in his stomach, but he mustn't be pushy about it. He mustn't hint even vaguely that he might be in need, that he might not have been frugal.

"Did you fix yourself a good tuck-in breakfast, sonny?"

"Are you kidding? French toast, bacon and eggs, orange juice—" He swallowed at the saliva flooding his mouth.

"Whattaya having for lunch?"

"Oodles of protein, Ma. Cottage cheese, tuna salad, milk, fruit—" He chocked off. He rubbed at his throat.

"When you having your big showing, sonny boy?"

"Wha—what?"

"You said you had a gallery lined up to show off your masterpieces. Said you were sure to get rave notices in the *Times* and be on your *way*!"

Lowenberry wrenched and scoured at the lower part of his face as if he were trying to reshape it. "Gallery, Ma. Sure, sure—the—ug—Max Slevogt Gallery. Down in the Village. Top showcase. I get a showing there and I'm on my way all right, no question. But timing's vital, Ma. I'm polishing up my best work. You can't rush art—can't push creativity—"

She gave a heavy *ho-ho-ho* laugh. "Well now, sonny, we've just got to get your big show on the road. I know your art is a precious thing. But we just celebrated your thirty-third birthday. And I do want to live to see you famous and rich, and I'm not getting any younger."

"I won't always be able to stand with you, sonny. And you can't face the struggle alone. I can't live there and take care of you and make a home for you. I'm just not city folks, you

know. Anyhow—" Ma giggled, "I'm a speck too old. Now if you're going to produce great work and make it big, you have to live a stable, rooted life, have the responsibility and support of a good wife, home and family." Saying it all like she hadn't already said it five hundred and eighty times before.

She paused. Her slow heavy breathing was in some way ominous. Then her voice sprang as though hoping to catch him by surprise.

"How's Nancy?"

Lowenberry rubbed anxiously at his wet forehead. He pressed at his mouth. He stared at Nancy's blow-ups watching him, listening from the walls and ceiling.

"nothing's wrong is there, sonny? With you and Nancy?"

"Oh no, Ma. We're beautiful together."

"Your letters sure sounded like it. And those new pictures. I just got them yesterday. Wowie! She's sure a pretty little thing. That's what I'm really calling about."

He blinked at his cramped quarters, as dusty and gray-lighted as a cave, at the worn armchairs facing each other across the lopsided coffeetable, irreparably stained and striated with coffee and wine and cigaret burns.

Not his. *He* didn't drink or smoke. The scars and residue of a thousand other anonymous tenants who used the place up, devoured its spirit and left it molding in dry rot like a discarded fruit rind—

"Sonny, you there?"

"Sure, Ma." *What about the check?*

"I'm dying to meet her!"

He rubbed at his throat. "Why you will, you will, Ma. One of these fine old days Nancy and I'll drive up the road there past the old lumber mill and—"

"I mean now, sonny. Looks to me like you've really settled down finally to a real serious thing. Lord knows I've prayed it would happen 'cause you've always been such a shy and lonely little tyke. And now that it looks so promising I'd better get in there and see your Nancy right now. Start making our big plans."

"Now?" he whispered.

"Today, sonny. This afternoon. Have to come into the city to see Murchison anyway. You know, our lawyer? About the estate? Money thing isn't too good nowadays. Wish I could give you more but so much is tied up in the trust. And income just doesn't go far. Still, we'll get by until you and Nancy get settled in and you're making money hand over fist

with your paintings. I'm taking the train at one-thirty and I'll see old Murch and then about sixish I'll be over to your pad to meet Nancy!"

"Ma," he choked. "Ma, wait—"

She'd hung up. He stared numbly at nothing he could name. He couldn't have explained it to her anyway. How you can't prod anything so delicate and ephemeral. It just had to grow at its own pace, find its own time. Who knew when his silent communion with Nancy would blossom and merge into the physical?

They already vibed on the deepest most intimate and secret levels with out words. It was something strange, extra-sensory, like ESP, maybe. They tuned in on one another's wavelengths. It happened when they passed in the lobby or hall. Sometimes on the street. They didn't even have to be near sometimes. Like at night—sharing dreams and longings. But it had to grow at its own proper, finely-tuned pace or it would die.

Lowenberry looked around the narrow, safe horizons of his room, at the peeling paint around the radiator, at his only window opening out into a dusty airshaft. For an instant he caught that ominous beat like his own blood pulsing too hard past his eyes.



Ma hadn't mentioned the check. Letting him sweat. And now he knew why. It was like a bribe. She'd been planning to come into the city. Whether or not she gave him the check this time—or maybe ever again—would depend on her meeting Nancy, approving of Nancy.

He squeezed his eyes against a thrust of dizziness and a kind of blurred focus came back to the shadowy room. He stared and fingered the air as though reaching for something vital, but unseen and undefinable. Then he kicked himself into frantic action.

Lowenberry found the paint-cracked palette, the dusty box

of paints, jar of brushes all buried in closet clutter. He dragged them into the room. God, why did Ma have to horn in on the delicate timing and rhythm of the only really sensitive exploratory togetherness he'd ever known? Nothing was ready.

He flicked blue and red paint over the canvas, then veins of yellow. He flicked more lurid oil over the floor, the walls, the pictures, over himself. Not that he was being deceptive. It was only a question of time before his exploding talent justified her faith and sacrifices. The timing was off, that was all. Her first visit to his pad a bit premature.

He let himself out cautiously into the gray cold light of the hall and ran in sockless sneakers to the rear stairwell. Less likely to meet Scrogg than if he took the elevator. He looked at his watch. Almost noon. No use hoping to catch Nancy still by the disposal chute of the seventh floor stairwell. She was punctual about everything.

He crouched shivering on the stairwell-landing where soot stirred with a faint whisper in the corners and a wind hissed under the dust-gray window, blowing tiny but cold against his face.

Then he ducked into the warmer hall with its stale

grease smell and antiseptic. He padded stealthily along the worn stained path of the carpet and stopped three feet from her door, 7-B.

The faint drift of her perfume reminded him of all the other-comforting times when he'd smelled her perfume, a kind of old rose smell, in the elevator and lobby and even down in the basement washrooms and by the garbage chute.

Her door was one of the oldies, never replaced by the owner. The hundredth or so layer of pale green enamel was cracked. A new safety lock had been installed, but the old style doorknob remained, with a keyhole beneath. Lowenberry stared at it and felt sweat tickle his upper lip. What was he thinking? He ignored the keyhole and stepped back, then eased down slowly and carefully, holding his breath, and put his ear to the door panel.

He listened but heard nothing. She always played music on her day off. He listened for their favorite, listened hard:

*So love me
As I love you
As I love you
In my revery . . .*

But there was no sound on the far side of the door, not even the music of her vacuum

cleaner or the dishes and pans rattling from the sink, or the voice of the newscaster she always listened to. And she always stayed home on her day off, all day. Quiet, lonely, a recluse, sensitive, not a social person at all. Just like him.

He looked at his watch again. She usually went down to the laundry room in the basement around noon. A door opened down the hall. He jumped back from Nancy's door and ducked fast down the hall, out the fire-exit door onto the stairwell landing and on down to the basement, under the cobwebbed pipes, through the cold shadowed damp and the smells of rat poison and stale soap toward the hum and churn of washing machines, one boiling over with foam like a mad-dened mouth.

No Nancy there. He ran up to the lobby, waited in the corner behind the artificial orange tree in the plastic barrel. Vaguely familiar faces came in, went out. Each time cold wind blew in through the double doors and touched Morton's thin ankles.

He waited until he was stiff and bluish and chattering with cold. No Nancy came or went. Maybe once, just this once, Nancy had slept late. He held on longer, until the mail carrier came and went, but Nancy

didn't come out for her mail.

Then it was after three and moving fast toward four. He shivered and rubbed his mouth. Nancy usually went to the corner Deli for the paper and cigarettes, maybe ice cream and soda, around four. Lowenberry waited. He felt sweat chilling on his face. She didn't show for her trip to the Deli. She didn't go out. She didn't come back from anywhere..

He ran into a howl of January wind that sliced down the parkway street and went through him like one of the black-limbed winter trees. He danced around as he peered through the frosted Deli windowpane. She wasn't there. He waited there until he thought he was frozen, all the time looking back toward the apartment building, afraid she'd go out without his seeing her.

No sight of her anywhere he thought, finally racing against bitter death back to the lobby. No sight or sound, no mental contact whatever.

What was wrong?

Wary about Scrogg lurking down a dark hallway, he ran back up to 7-B. He stood near her door trying to control the rasping intakes of convulsive breath. What if she'd gone down in the elevator while he ran up the stairs? He started

back toward the elevator, momentarily forgetting Scrogg, and then he heard that soft laugh, more of a whispery giggle, behind Nancy's door.

He hesitated, then stumbled back there. Had he really heard that sound that seemed familiar and obscene? He leaned his ear against the door panel. He didn't hear it now and surely had never heard it.

Not from Nancy's apartment.

Probably from the adjoining apartment from where weird sounds often came.

He stared down at the bell button.

His eyes throbbed and burned. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. It felt wet. He extended his hand, trembling, toward the bell. He seemed to push his finger against an invisible wall and finally he jerked his finger back.

He really shouldn't. The relationship wasn't ready for physical probing. He knew that. But this was a desperate emergency and she would understand that. Yes, she would.

They understood one another on the deepest levels of meaning and truth and they knew all about one another and she would understand—and she would be in touch and assuring him that she understood if she

could. *But she couldn't.* He realized that now. *Something was wrong—terribly wrong.*

He ran down to his apartment and dialed her number.

"Yeah?"

His throat constricted and his lips moved wordlessly. Something steely-edged had stuck in his throat and he kept moving his head slowly from side to side. Must have dialed the wrong number. That voice that had answered was definitely a man's.

He dialed again, very deliberately and carefully.

"Yeah!" The same voice, but grating this time, not friendly at all. Morton heard the music then, too.

*Come, love me
As I love you
In my reverie . . .*

He swallowed, then with forced calm, he said, "Is Miss Wortley there, please?"

"Yeah, she's here." The voice was gross, distinctly unpleasant. It didn't belong in Nancy's life. Might it be a burglar, someone who had forced his way in? Why hadn't he thought of that earlier? The neighborhood, the whole town, was an armed camp, living in day and night fear of burglary, muggings and—rape? Oh lordie why hadn't he—

"Who the hell wants to know?"

"I—" Lowenberry choked. But this was all wrong and he hung up slowly and examined his bitten nails and listened to his few remaining minutes of grace ticking away.

IT WAS after five. Sixish, she'd said. Might be after six. Might be sooner. Might be any time. Any time at all.

All points of light in the room seemed to multiply, as though some focus behind his eyes had suddenly been changed. Then he moved out and up the stairs, trying to move fast, but seeming to drift heavily as though against his own will, strangely like himself in one of his own dreams.

He went down the seventh floor hallway as though it were unfamiliar, his course somewhat erratic like that of a mole in strong light. Shouldn't push, he knew. Shouldn't force anything as sensitive and delicate and fragile as spun glass. But it was late—so late—almost six—

He leaned against the wall, then pushed a shaky finger at the bell button. He jerked it back, stood dizzily, fighting things that crawled up through a trapdoor in his brain, those nameless little incubi with no bodies or faces that scuttled in-

side his head squeaking in furry voices of doubt and doom and disaster.

He wiped at his wet forehead then felt himself bending slowly, trying to control the sound of his breathing, then squinting and relieved to see nothing. Nothing but a warm watery blur and he felt the little warm finger of air, Nancy's perfumed air, coming out to him like a whisper.

But this was another kind of whisper. A sighing and then a faint giggle. Pain pulled at his eyes as he squinted harder. And his vision was suddenly filled with that vaguely familiar shape, hunched and solid as some huge brown smudge. The shape blurred.

Then Lowenberry saw up close a section of thickly corded forearm, the black hairs curled like wire, and the fuzzy blue tattoo of a nude woman undulating on a bed of writhing muscle. And that was familiar too, a fear-striking thing he'd seen too often, even in bad dreams. But seeing it here through a keyhole, dancing in Nancy's private world, seemed far more unreal and grotesque than anything in or out of nightmare.

Get out! Run! A warning screamed inside him as in an animal intuitively sensing the edge of a fatal trap. He started

to push back and up out of his deep-kneed crouch, but he'd been there longer than he'd realized, and blocked circulation had partly paralyzed his legs. He heard the door latch snap with the metallic click of a giant gun hammer.

The door exploded suddenly away from him, toppling his helpless weight in after it. And he seemed to topple a long way in a kind of slow motion until he saw the balled fist and it crashed into his mouth.

He felt something crumble and warm liquid in his eyes and throat. He fell backward again, out into the hall. He felt his head snapping back. Scrogg hunched over him, a viciously happy grin fuzzy and distorted through a mist of pain.

No mistaking that thick body, naked but for weird polkadot shorts and a mat of black chest hair. The face swelled and contracted like a bobbing balloon with flat nose, small bunched eyes, lumpy splotched face with lips drawn back over those small yellow teeth. The grin broke into a laugh, not a natural laugh, not a very nice laugh at all.

"Who is it?" Nancy's voice caalled from another universe.

"That longhaired creep from the rhird deck."

"What's he want?"

"More of this, baby," Scrogg said, and Lowenberry saw the fist fall on him again. Lowenberry had always known, from bitterest experience, that men like Scrogg wanted to brutalize him, wanted to hurt and maim and finally kill him. Knowing better than to fight, he always talked his way out, hid or ran away.

And now, eyes blurred with blood and pain, he scrambled away down the hall on his hands and knees and reached the stairwell and started down. But Scrogg dragged him back up onto the flat butcher's block of linoleum like a rabbit out of a hole, flipped him onto his back, collapsed on top of him, grunting his thick mouth wheezing. Lowenberry smelled liquor. And sweat. Old stale rancid sweat.

He kicked and clawed, but the smothering weight covered him like he was drowning in a sea of heavy stone. Those splayed hands gripped his throat and twisted, locking Lowenberry in pulverizing intimacy.

The giant red wheel revolved sweeping everything up. Red dots came and went, large, now small, dissolving away toward a nebulous dark . . .

But he couldn't breathe anymore. Smothering, drowning, fading out, going under

and own into that blackness like muddy earth. And he couldn't run. He couldn't run and hide anymore. Oh lordie lordie he was going to die . . . not be anything anywhere . . . nothing . . . He saw walls, the overhead hall light, a torn patch of wallpaper, Scrogg's gross animal face, objects flashing meaninglessly across his eyes as scenery whirls before the screaming face of a roller-coaster.

"Morty, we can't let him do it to us. Morty—we can't die when we haven't lived. Remember how we said that, Morty?"

Nancy! She had broken through to him again.

It flooded through Lowenberry then more joyous and freeing than the first breath he'd ever taken. It was hatred released. Hatred and revenge. And power. It whipped his body upward like a grasped snake someone has assumed to be dead. He jerked, squirmed, snapped, clawed, kicked and kneed.

Scrogg grunted with surprise then gave a roar of pain. Lowenberry felt an easing and defensive shifting of the big man's weight. He jabbed with his fingers and elbows. He gritted his teeth into a chunk of sweaty forearm and rammed

his knees up again and again. Scrogg's face, bleeding and terrible, mad, hate-filled, fell away from him and Lowenberry was up crouching, his back against the iron railing of the stairs.

Scrogg whined and lunged at him with vicious eagerness. Lowenberry slid to one side and Scrogg made a sudden sound against the rail. Lowenberry turned, chopped and kicked and pushed until Scrogg was hanging over the rail, holding on with one hand, beating the other at the air. Then both feet flew up and his fading cry came back as his body sailed down into the gray depths of the stairwell. Lowenberry heard the thud of meaty ricochet and final splat.

Nancy's door was shut again. She must be so frightened, he thought. But understood. She always understood. Meanwhile it was late, sixish, and Ma might be there knocking at his door. He ran. He ran past the opened doors and white faces and someone yelling. Mustn't keep Ma waiting and she could meet Nancy later. Later this evening when things settled down . . .

The phone was ringing when he opened the door. His breath was spasmadic, almost a sob, as he grabbed up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Hi there, sonny boy. This is your old Ma again. I've been calling you all afternoon. Where have you *been*?"

"I'm sorry, Ma. Where are you? Where—?"

"Well I'm sorry, honey, but I can't make it today. I mean into the city. You know Mrs. McBundy down the road. She took bad sick, stroke looks like, and I've got to look after her this evening. I had to cancel my appointment with Murch. But I'll be in to see him tomorrow or the next day, probably Saturday for sure. Then I'll see Nancy and we'll have a ball. I'm just dying to meet her."

He heard the footsteps and voices, then the knocking on the door. The knocking got louder. But he didn't care any-

more. He sat and waited and the outside world retreated pleasantly into the distance and out of sight and sound...

QUESTION. Are you saying you didn't know Morton Lowenberry at all, never even saw him before?

ANSWER. I just didn't know him that's all.

QUESTION. You must have seen him before. After all he lived below on the third floor.

ANSWER. Maybe I did see him around a time or two. Yes, think I did...

From a newspaper interview with Nancy Wortley, with whom the murderer kept insisting he had been having a love affair.

ANGEL OF MERCY

by EDWIN P. HICKS

(Concluded from Page 111)

to their reward. If not, she would visit the Rosewood Nursing Home tomorrow morning.

Her finances were in such a bad shape she just had to manage one sound meal a day the best she could. If she couldn't

find one free meal a day, the end was inevitable—loss of her and Willie's home, loss of old Betsy, a parting with Willie's things—and residence from then on in a nursing home! It was unthinkable!



LADIES' MAN

by
GEORGE
BELLEFONTAINE

*The red bikini Mrs. Lawton
wore was like a flag to
Earl; but red means danger!*

THOMAS EARL watched it all from his front lawn. Considering the predicament he was in, he remained extraordinarily cool in the hot afternoon sun.

First the ambulance arrived. A moment later two police cars screeched to a halt. Mr. Lawton was the last to arrive. When they told him about his wife he screamed in anguish. One of the detectives led Lawton to a police car and they both climbed into the back seat.

Earl waited for the inevitable, and it came shortly after they removed Mrs. Lawton's lifeless body by stretcher. A tall, husky man in a grey suit emerged from the house now

and he crossed the driveway, started up the lawn and just missed stepping into Earl's rock garden.

"I'm Lieutenant Bowman. You must be Thomas Earl."

"Yes," Earl managed. "It's just terrible."

Bowman took a pen and pad from his coat pocket. "You want to give me your statement?"

"I sell insurance," Earl began. "I work mostly at night. Home a lot in the day so I like to putter around the lawn. Trim the hedge, pick weeds out of the rock garden, you know." "Yeah, you were working on the lawn. Now what

happened in the house next door?"

"I guess it was about two o'clock. I heard a commotion—a scream—and next I heard the Lawtons' back door slam. I caught a glimpse of this man running from the back door to the fence at the rear of the yard. He jumped over it and disappeared into the woods."

"What did he look like?" Bowman asked.

"About six foot. Long hair. He wore a leather jacket with some kind of crest on it. I couldn't make it out. Probably belonged to one of those motorcycle gangs."

"Did you chase him?" the lieutenant asked.

"No," Earl replied. "I was concerned about Mrs. Lawton. I went to her front door and knocked. There was no answer so I went in and saw her body on the living room floor. I could see blood trickling from behind her head. And there was blood on a marble coffee table nearby. I felt for her pulse but there was none. That's when I called the police."

Another detective appeared, made his way up Lawton's driveway and disappeared around the back of the house.

"She was a good looker, eh," Bowman said.

"I'd have to say that was right," Earl agreed.

"But what kind of a woman was she?"

Earl shrugged. "My wife and I—she's at work right now—we moved here about two months ago so I didn't get to know the Lawtons other than to say hello. But there was one thing..."

"Go on," Bowman urged.

"It started a few weeks ago. She—Mrs. Lawton—would make it a point to sunbathe about this time every so often. She would always come out the front door and she always wore this little red bikini. Then she'd walk slowly to her back yard."

"Why the front door?" Bowman asked.

"Well," Earl lowered his head in false modesty, "I guess she was kind of—well—you know—" know—"

"Attracted to you," Bowman suggested.

"I guess," Earl smiled. "My wife can tell you. She's always getting jealous about other women giving me the eye. They say I'm a ladies' man—the fellows at the office, you know."

"Do you ever take advantage of this talent," Bowman wondered.

"Of course not," Earl said. "I'm a happily married man." Then with a twinkle in his eye, "But being an insurance salesman does offer a fellow opportunities."

"I'll bet," Bowman said and his lips seemed to curl in a sneer. "But come one now, haven't you given in just once?"

Earl almost fell into Bowman's trap. Sure he wanted to admit there were all kinds of women in his life, what man wouldn't? But this was a cop looking for a murderer.

"Like I said, Lieutenant, I'm happily married."

Bowman started to say something but the detective who was in the Lawtons' back yard called out. Bowman excused himself and disappeared around the back.

Earl thought he felt a trickle of sweat on his brow. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand but it was dry. He let out a sigh of relief.

It shouldn't have happened, he knew. He shouldn't have followed her into the house. But he had taken it as long as he could. She had been asking for it. Then why had she fought him? A tease, of course. Well, she screamed and he slugged her and she hit her head on that marble coffee table. He hadn't meant to hurt her but she asked for it. In a panic he started for the back door, thinking it would be better to slip out that way, then over to the safety of his own yard.

He stopped when he realized that someone could easily see



him leaving by the back door as well as the front. Selling insurance took coolness and he remained cool until he figured out a solution. It was simple. He was a good neighbor who heard a commotion and came to help. Catching a glimpse of a man running out the back door would lend strength to his story. Everything would work out.

Bowman returned, pointed a finger at Earl as if to say something, then scratched his head. "I'll be with you in a moment, Mr. Earl."

Bowman went to the car where Mr. Lawton and another policeman were still seated. He poked his head inside the win-

dow and stayed that way for a long time. Meanwhile, the other detective who had been poking around the Lawton back yard now made his way up to Earl.

"You sure you saw this fellow come out of the back door and run across the yard."

"I didn't see him come out of the door," Earl explained. "I heard the door slam and then I saw him run across the yard and jump over the fence."

"Then how do you know he came out of the back door?"

"It's the only way out, other than the front door. And I was out front. I would have seen him."

"How long were you out front?"

"From the time Mrs. Lawton came out to sunbathe until the time she went in. I was still out on my lawn when I heard her scream."

"Then the killer must have come in the back door and left the same way."

"By golly," Earl said brightly, "you're right. I never thought of that."

The detective nodded and wrote it all down on a piece of paper. He then joined Bowman at the car. Five minutes later

they both came back and positioned themselves in front of Earl.

"Is—is something wrong?" Earl asked.

"Maybe I better show you, Earl."

Bowman took his arm and led him around to the Lawtons' back porch. Bowman pointed to the door.

"You said you only lived here for two months," Bowman said. "So I guess you had no way of knowing. It seems the Lawtons had a little fire about three months ago. It was contained to the back porch. The floors were badly damaged and dangerous. Until Lawton could get around to fixing it he—"

"That's why she always used the front door," Earl mumbled, his eyes fixed on the spike that had been driven into the door at an angle just above the latch.

"Guess Mrs. Lawton didn't find you such a ladies' man after all," Lieutenant Bowman said.

He also said something about being under arrest and having the right to remain silent, but Earl wasn't listening. He was too busy trying to cope with this final blow to his pride.

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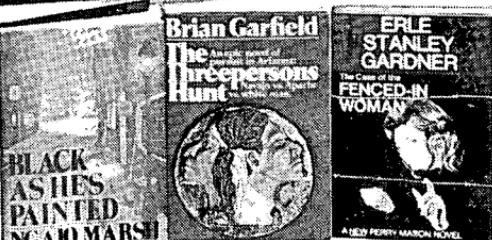
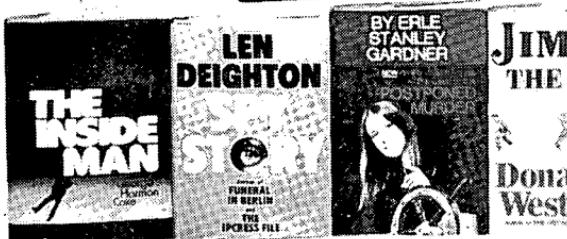
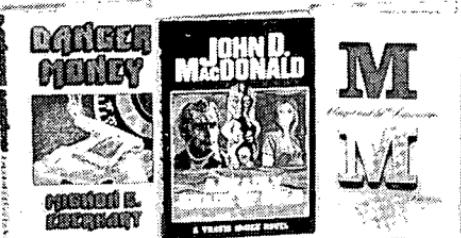
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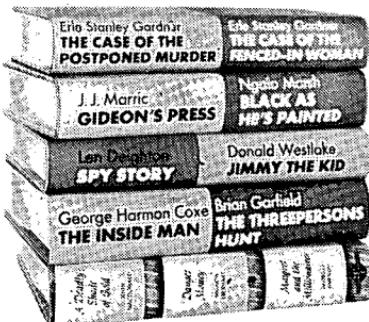
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